



The
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Sheffield.

Algorithmic Vibes: Exploring The Sense-Making Practices of Self-Employed Women in Everyday Entrepreneurship

Rebecca Ruddock

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

The University of Sheffield
Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Sociology, Politics and International Relations.

Submitted: June 2025

Declaration

I, Rebecca Ruddock, confirm that this thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by saying thank you, from the bottom of my heart, to the women who participated in this research, who dedicated valuable time to discuss their experiences and share honest reflections about the ups and downs of entrepreneurship. Thank you for being so open and generous sharing both your insights and your time with me.

I express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors, Professor Helen Kennedy and Dr Harrison Smith. I could not have asked for a more skilled, knowledgeable, and supportive supervisory team. Their expertise and guidance has been invaluable throughout my PhD journey, and I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity to learn and grow under their mentorship.

I also gratefully acknowledge the support of the Department of Sociology at The University of Sheffield, whose funding and resources made this research possible, as well as the academic and professional services staff who have provided invaluable assistance and inspiration throughout my PhD.

Completing this thesis would not have been possible were it not for the support I received from the Disability and Dyslexia Support Service at The University of Sheffield. In particular, I wish to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Rachael Staves, the specialist mentor who has supported me throughout this challenging journey, and helped me to prioritise my health and wellbeing, as much as I have my PhD.

Finally, but certainly by no means least, thank you to my family who have always supported and believed in me, and been a constant source of inspiration. To my mum Linda, my dad Reg, and my sister and brother, Kerensa and Paul, thank you so much. To my partner, Henry, thank you for being the backbone of my support system and always reminding me to believe in myself. And perhaps most importantly for providing essential fuel, in the form of delicious meals, cups of tea, and endless laughter.

Abstract

My thesis proposes *algorithmic vibes* as a concept for understanding how everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of social media algorithms, and the entanglement between this sense-making and their entrepreneurial practices on digital platforms. Algorithmic vibes captures the intuitive and affective, speculative and anticipatory, and situated orientations of everyday women entrepreneurs towards social media algorithms. By everyday women entrepreneurs, I refer to women who use social media to sustain small businesses, such as dance teachers and dog groomers. I focus on this group because they are absent from existing literature on digital entrepreneurship, which focuses on highly visible entrepreneurs, such as professional content creators and start-up founders in high-growth or venture-backed start-ups.

Drawing on 28 semi-structured interviews with UK-based women entrepreneurs, supplemented by follow-up correspondence and some observation, I make three core arguments about algorithmic vibes. First, I argue that algorithmic vibes are intuitive and affective orientations through which participants feel their way through platform logics and navigate visibility in conditions of opacity and uncertainty. Second, I argue that algorithmic vibes are speculative and anticipatory, formed in response to the unpredictability of algorithms. Finally, I argue that algorithmic vibes are constructed in different ways based on participants' social, cultural, economic, and professional positioning within society and the platform economy.

My thesis opens up a discussion on how women entrepreneurs' orientations to algorithms are constructed through lived experience and platform participation, inviting renewed attention to the uneven conditions under which visibility is pursued and felt in the platform economy. As such, my research speaks to ongoing concerns about platform labour, algorithmic governance, and the conditions under which visibility is made possible. It contributes to debates in sociology, media and communications, and critical marketing and business studies. My findings are also relevant to policy-makers and stakeholders working to support women's entrepreneurship.

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Chapter One - Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In the context of a rapidly evolving digital economy, self-employment has become an increasingly prominent form of work. In this thesis, and explained in detail below, I use the term self-employment to refer to individuals who run their own businesses and engage in entrepreneurial activity, whether as sole traders, partners, or Directors of limited companies. Entrepreneurship is often framed as a flexible alternative to traditional employment, offering individuals greater autonomy over the type, timing, and nature of their work. For many, particularly those balancing paid labour with unpaid caregiving and domestic responsibilities, flexibility is not merely desirable but essential. These caregiving and domestic responsibilities continue to fall disproportionately on women (Office of National Statistics 2023), as has long been the case (Hochschild and Machung 2002), shaping both their participation in and experiences of self-employment and entrepreneurship.

Despite the appeal of self-employment, a persistent gender gap exists both in terms of the proportion of women who are self-employed compared to men and in the quality and security of self-employed work (OECD 2021a). Digital technologies, and social media in particular, are frequently positioned as tools of empowerment that can help close this gap (Ekinsmyth 2014). Platforms are celebrated for offering low-cost, accessible means of starting and growing a business, allowing women to engage in entrepreneurial activity on their own terms (Duffy and Hund 2015). However, these optimistic narratives obscure the structural inequalities that shape and constrain women's experiences of online entrepreneurship.

One of the defining features of social media platforms is the algorithmic systems that govern what content is seen and by whom. For entrepreneurs who rely on social media to market their products or services, visibility is not optional but is a prerequisite for generating income. Yet platform visibility is controlled by proprietary algorithms that are opaque, complex, and constantly changing. Rather than levelling the playing field, algorithmic systems can replicate and perpetuate the structural inequalities that women entrepreneurs face offline (Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017).

The mechanisms behind algorithmic decision-making remain largely hidden from view. As Bucher (2018) highlights, this opacity is by design, stemming not only from the technical complexity of algorithms but also from the commercial interests that guard these systems as proprietary. Pasquale (2015) captures this concealment through the metaphor of the “black box,” where we may see what goes in and what comes out, yet the internal process that links the two remains inaccessible.

Entrepreneurs who use social media to reach potential customers and build their businesses, referred to henceforth as online entrepreneurs, are compelled to speculate about how algorithms function and what practices might enhance their reach in order to secure platform visibility (Cotter 2019). I use the term ‘algorithmic sense-making’ to refer to these processes throughout this thesis. In this thesis, I argue that algorithmic sense-making happens in uneven ways and is unpredictably rewarded due to persistent structural inequalities.

My thesis seeks to understand the algorithmic sense-making of a group of self-employed women I refer to as ‘everyday women entrepreneurs’. These are women who use social media to sell products or services which exist outside of social media platforms. They are the founders and operators of their own businesses, and they do not have any employees.

Everyday women entrepreneurs are distinct from social media influencers who generate revenue primarily through publishing content on digital platforms. Influencers are “ostensibly ordinary platform users who accrue followings on social media via “authentic” (yet stylised) coverage of their everyday lives” (Bishop 2023, p. 2). The term ‘professional content creator’ is increasingly used to refer to these individuals (Hoose and Rosenbohm 2023; Arriagada and Ibáñez 2020). Therefore, I also use this term in my thesis when I write about this group. Professional content creators have been the primary focus of most extant research on women’s entrepreneurship on algorithmic platforms (e.g. Cotter 2019; Bishop 2019; 2020; Duffy and Hund 2019). My research, therefore, fills a gap by focusing on a different, significant group of women entrepreneurs online.

In Chapter Four (Methodology), and the subsequent empirical chapters (Five - Seven) I introduce my participants, who operate a wide range of businesses including retailers, teachers, therapists and coaches. The nature of the participants' business is not what constitutes the 'everyday-ness' of their entrepreneurship. In fact, some of their businesses might appear unusual or unique. What makes these participants 'everyday entrepreneurs' is not the type of business they run, but the way entrepreneurship is embedded in the rhythms, responsibilities, and practicalities of their everyday lives. Additionally, their entrepreneurial practices are often much less visible, particularly in online spaces, than those of professional content creators.

This thesis investigates how everyday women entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom (UK) make sense of social media algorithms, and the relationship between their algorithmic sense-making and their social media practices. It focuses on women from a diverse range of social, economic, cultural and professional positions. In doing so, it pays attention to the differences that exist amongst everyday women entrepreneurs. This study situates algorithmic sense-making and entrepreneurial social media practices within the broader context of the platform economy and the algorithmic systems that govern visibility, and it pays particular attention to the relationship between platform structures and logics and the algorithmic sense-making and practices of everyday women entrepreneurs. As such, it contributes to sociological understandings of digital labour, women's entrepreneurship and algorithmic governance in the platform economy.

This thesis argues that everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of social media algorithms by constructing orientations that are affective and intuitive, speculative and anticipatory, and situated. Orientation, a term that I discuss in Chapter Three (Theoretical Framework) is used to refer to the way individuals come to inhabit and move through spaces by leaning toward what feels familiar, promising, and viable. To describe these orientations, I propose the concept of algorithmic vibes. Later in this chapter, I elaborate on how algorithmic vibes emerged as the core concept and how it is employed analytically throughout the thesis.

Drawing on feminist theories of affect, intuition, and situated knowledge, I develop the concept of algorithmic vibes to capture how everyday women entrepreneurs orient themselves to shifting algorithmic logics in the absence of clear information about how algorithms work. Rather than focusing on what algorithms are or how they technically function, this thesis investigates how they are felt, interpreted, and responded to in practice. I argue that algorithmic vibes are constructed through lived experience, including moments of frustration, uncertainty, anticipation, and hope. Algorithmic vibes are also influenced by embodied dispositions, which Bourdieu (1990) might describe as habitus, a concept I discuss later in the thesis, platform atmospheres, structures and infra-structures. These orientations are also informed by participants' positioning within broader socio-economic and cultural conditions.

My argument contributes to critical debates about algorithmic sense-making and digital entrepreneurship by shifting analytical attention away from assumptions of user ignorance or irrationality, and toward a more grounded, relational account of how people live and work with algorithmic systems. I argue that algorithmic sense-making involves intuitive, anticipatory and situated orientations to platform logics, constituted through practice, positioning, and platform feedback. Through this lens, I highlight how algorithmic vibes are experienced differently depending on users' economic resources, personal and professional networks, time constraints, and entrepreneurial identities, values and goals. By centering the voices of everyday women entrepreneurs, this thesis highlights the ongoing, situated labour involved in remaining visible within the platform economy, and the affective, practical, and political consequences of algorithmic opacity for everyday women entrepreneurs.

1.2 Women and Online Entrepreneurship

1.2.1 Defining Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship

In discussions of entrepreneurship, a variety of terms are used interchangeably, including *self-employed*, *business owner*, *entrepreneur*, and *founder*. These terms are not necessarily synonymous and can carry distinct legal, economic, and sociocultural connotations.

There is no single, universally accepted definition of entrepreneurship, a point that is addressed in more detail in Chapter Two (Literature Review). In this study, the term *entrepreneur* is defined as someone who owns and manages a business, with or without innovation, and takes responsibility for its success or failure.

In the UK, an individual is considered self-employed if they “run a business for themselves and take responsibility for its success or failure”, they “do not have the rights and responsibilities of an employee” and they are “not paid through ‘Pay As You Earn’ (PAYE)’ (HMRC 2022a). Pay As You Earn (PAYE) is the system used by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) in the United Kingdom to collect Income Tax and National Insurance contributions from employees’ wages or occupational pensions (UK Government 2025). In the UK, entrepreneurs are not necessarily self-employed; they can also register as company directors. Although company directors are responsible for the operation and success of their business, their legal and tax status differs from that of self-employed sole traders or partners. For instance, directors may pay themselves a salary via PAYE (HMRC 2022c).

In practice, the distinction between self-employment and company directorship does not necessarily reflect differences in entrepreneurs’ lived experiences of entrepreneurship. Participants in this study included both registered self-employed sole-traders and Directors of limited companies. Therefore, the term *self-employed* is used in this thesis to refer to individuals who run a business and take responsibility for its success or failure, as sole traders, partners or directors of limited companies. In this thesis, I use the terms self-employed and entrepreneur interchangeably when referring to everyday women entrepreneurs.

The ‘everyday women entrepreneurs’ on whom this study focuses operate small scale businesses, usually with no employees and regardless of their HMRC status. To understand the economic context of everyday women’s entrepreneurship, I draw primarily on statistical and policy data relating to self-employment, as this relates most accurately to the circumstances of everyday women entrepreneurs. Although self-employment data excludes Company Directors, it is still most appropriate for this study where the majority of participants are self-employed. It is also appropriate because reports and data about entrepreneurship more broadly encompass

founders and Directors of large corporations, which does not reflect the circumstances of self-employed people.

1.2.2 The Gender Self-Employment Gap

Structural inequalities continue to constrain women's participation in entrepreneurship, despite widespread narratives of opportunity and empowerment (Duffy and Hund 2015). A gender self-employment gap persists across local, national, and international contexts with women remaining significantly under-represented in self-employment worldwide. Men are around 1.5 times more likely than women to start a business globally (OECD 2021b), a statistic which underscores that deeply embedded social, cultural and economic barriers continue to shape women's entrepreneurial opportunities.

In the UK, self-employment amongst women has increased in recent years, yet women still comprise between 35% (House of Commons Library 2025) and 39% (IPSE 2024) of self-employed workers (House of Commons Library 2025) and significant disparities remain not only in who becomes self-employed, but in the nature, quality and security of women's self-employment. Research has found that self-employed women are more likely than men to experience low earnings and job insecurity, which is linked to the prevalence of women-owned businesses in sectors where work is traditionally low-paid, such as personal care, health and social care, education and arts (Watson 2020). As such, self-employment has been described as a route into low-paid work for some women (Women's Budget Group 2024b).

In the UK, women of colour have been instrumental in the growth of women's entrepreneurship, yet they experience disproportionate insecurity in self-employed work and are often most at risk during periods of crisis and uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Martinez Dy and Jayawarna 2020). Martinez dy et al (2024) explain these inequalities using the concept of racial capitalism, which refers to the way capitalist systems rely on and reproduce racial hierarchies, shaping who can access economic opportunity and under what conditions. In the context of self-employment, racial capitalism explains why racially minoritised and working-class individuals are disproportionately represented in precarious, low-return

forms of entrepreneurship, despite dominant narratives of meritocracy. Dominant narratives of meritocracy assume that success in entrepreneurship is primarily the result of individual talent, effort, or skill (Gill 2014). I return to the concept of meritocracy in more detail below, and in the following chapter, discussing how such an ethos circulates in the context of women's entrepreneurship and platform visibility.

Solo self-employment (without employees) is often praised for offering 'gendered flexibility', enabling women to overcome 'work-family conflict' by giving them greater autonomy over when and where they work (Bari et al 2021; Ekinsmyth 2014). The need to accommodate unpaid caregiving responsibilities, which remain unequally distributed along gender lines, is frequently cited by women as the motivation for their self-employment (Women's Budget Group 2024a). Consequently, self-employed women are more likely to work part-time (Watson 2020), which impacts their short-term wealth (i.e. regular income) and medium to long-term wealth (i.e. savings and pensions). This structural pattern of constrained time and reduced earnings further contributes to the gender self-employment gap, reinforcing economic inequalities between women and men.

As well as the co-occurrence of caregiving responsibilities and self-employment, disabled people are more likely than non-disabled people to be self-employed (Department for Work and Pensions 2023) and there has been a significant rise in the number of disabled self-employed women in the UK in recent years (Watson 2020). The prevalence of self-employment amongst disabled people is commonly attributed to the barriers faced by disabled people in entering paid employment (Navani et al 2023). Although self-employment may provide disabled people with the flexibility they need to manage health condition(s) whilst sustaining paid work, self-employed disabled people are more likely than other self-employed workers to experience insecure work and fluctuating income (Navani et al 2023). Research suggests that it can also be more difficult for disabled people to access start-up capital (Navani et al 2023).

The structural conditions and systematic barriers that shape women's self-employment and entrepreneurial outcomes are obscured by dominant ideological frameworks. In the contemporary platform economy, digital platforms are

integrated into broader “processes of capitalisation” (Langley and Leyshon 2017, p. 12), and are seen to facilitate connections, both social and economic, between different groups (Evans and Schmalensee 2016). The platform economy is underpinned by neoliberal values that emphasise individual responsibility and competition (Springer et al. 2016). Within this context, individuals are expected to take personal responsibility for their success, and are encouraged to adopt the values of autonomy, flexibility, self-direction and optimisation (Bennett 2024). Scholars have critiqued this ideal of the neoliberal worker as one that is “self-sacrificing, self-directed [and] entrepreneurial,” and as a model of labour characterised by “risk, insecurity and contingency” (Gill 2010, pp. 250–251). Neoliberal discourses of work are reinforced by postfeminist narratives that frame entrepreneurship as gender neutral and success as a matter of ambition, self-discipline and personal effort (Lewis 2014). As a result, an ethos of meritocracy permeates dominant understandings of entrepreneurship, casting structural inequalities as individual shortcomings rather than systemic issues.

In the context of women’s entrepreneurship and digital technologies, Martinez Dy et al (2017) refer to this belief as ‘meritocratic opportunity enactment’, based on the assumption that digital technologies create a level playing field for women entrepreneurs. However, these discourses obscure persistent structural inequalities that continue to constrain women’s entrepreneurship (Martinez Dy et al. 2017; Byrne et al. 2019). Hence, Martinez Dy and Jayawarna (2020) conclude that “the entrepreneurial activity of those who exist as ‘Other’ become invisible”, this encompasses “women, people of colour, poor, working-class, disabled and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA) self-employed and entrepreneurial individuals” (p. 395).

This study builds on these critiques by examining how everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of social media algorithms within a platform economy that obscures structural inequality, promotes individual responsibility, and positions visibility and success as matters of personal optimisation rather than systemic constraint. It does so through empirical research with women who are differentially positioned in relation to privilege, including along lines of race, ethnicity, class, disability, and age. Women are already marked as Other within the normative space

of entrepreneurship, which continues to centre a hegemonic ideal of the entrepreneur as white, masculine, and individualistic (Martinez Dy and Jayawarna 2020). In designing this study, I therefore actively sought to recruit participants whose bodies, experiences, and practices are marginalised not only within entrepreneurial discourse, but also within the normative cultures of social media platforms.

1.2.3 Visibility Governed by Algorithms

The idea of digital entrepreneurship as a meritocracy is particularly problematic in the context of social media platforms, where proprietary algorithms determine what and who is made visible. In the context of social media platforms, algorithms act as information intermediaries that make decisions about what content to present to each user and, therefore, who and what is visible (Cotter and Reisdorf 2020). These algorithms are not neutral. They are inscribed with values about what or who is valuable, relevant, or deserving of attention (Martin 2019). Consequently, researchers have found that algorithms tend to replicate and perpetuate existing structural inequalities (e.g. Noble 2018; Criado Perez 2020), undermining the notion that success is solely a matter of individual effort or ability (Cotter and Reisdorf 2020).

This is further problematized by the opacity of algorithms, which are considered “black boxes” because knowledge about their inner workings is inaccessible, due to the proprietary nature of the technology (Pasquale 2015). The opacity of algorithms, combined with their complexity and the fact they are in a near-constant state of change, makes it challenging for users to understand what they are and how they affect their platform visibility (Bucher 2018). This is especially consequential for entrepreneurs who rely on social media visibility, which is governed by algorithms, to market their products and services and generate income.

Given the challenges entrepreneurs face in obtaining platform visibility in the context of algorithmic opacity, a number of scholars have conducted research to investigate how certain groups of online entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms, and how this sense-making influences their online practices (e.g. Cotter 2019; Bishop 2019; Duffy

2020). The practices of sense-making that scholars have identified, especially amongst professional content creators, include learning the ‘rules of the visibility game’ (Cotter 2019), acquiring practical knowledge (Cotter 2022) and engaging in algorithmic gossip (Bishop 2019), all of which I discuss in the following chapter (Chapter Two: Literature Review).

However, the pursuit of visibility is not experienced equally. As Duffy and Hund (2019) argue, the burden of maintaining visibility is shaped by broader inequalities, including gender, class, and race. For women entrepreneurs in particular, navigating platform visibility often means contending with gender norms that are both encoded in and reinforced by algorithmic logics. Duffy and Hund argue that women entrepreneurs have to navigate gender norms on social media, and the stakes include not only visibility but the risk of being subjected to “ridicule, hate, and harassment” if they are perceived to act outside of gender expectations (p. 4983). Additionally, both Bishop (2020) and Cotter (2019) argue that structural inequalities, including socioeconomic status and race, affect the ability of individual professional content creators to engage in algorithmic sense-making and optimise their practices in order to improve and maintain platform visibility. Cotter (2019) concludes that the visibility logics of social media platforms “reinforces offline hierarchies of social privilege with ‘winners’ being those with greater access to social, cultural, political and economic resources” (p. 909).

Studies of entrepreneurship have tended to focus on industries dominated by men, and on what Jones et al (2025) refer to as “highly visible entrepreneurial success stories” (p. 13). However, in the context of digital entrepreneurship, there are a number of studies that focus on women entrepreneurs’ online visibility practices (e.g. Duffy and Hund 2019; Bishop 2019; Cotter 2019; Abidin 2017). These studies focus specifically on social media influencers or professional content creators, so although they have generated valuable insights into women’s platform labour, they do not encompass women whose digital labour is not centred on content creation as a profession. My study addresses that gap by focusing on a different and under-researched category of platform labour: everyday women entrepreneurs.

‘Everyday women entrepreneurs’ operate small businesses, usually with no employees. It is common for them to make use of social media to generate revenue

by selling their products or services. Their business might function primarily online, such as bookkeepers, remote administrative assistants and proofreaders, or they might use social media to generate work but deliver their services offline, such as hairdressers, dog walkers and cleaners. Unlike influencers and professional content creators, whose revenue depends on producing platform-optimised content, everyday entrepreneurs use social media as a tool to sell their products or services, rather than a product in itself. By centering the voices of everyday women entrepreneurs, my study offers a novel empirical contribution to debates about platform governance, algorithmic precarity, and digital labour. In doing so, I make visible the more diffuse, affective, and often undervalued forms of work that sustain self-employment under platform capitalism.

1.3 Theoretical Framework: Algorithmic Sense-Making

I propose the concept of ‘algorithmic sense-making’ to understand how everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms and how this is entangled with their social media practices. Whereas Chapter Two (Literature Review) reviews existing literature on the platform economy, women’s entrepreneurship, digital labour, and algorithmic sense-making, Chapter Three (Theoretical Framework) lays out the conceptual tools I use to make sense of participants’ narratives and theorise how algorithmic sense-making takes place in the specific social, cultural, and technological context of the platform economy. To construct this theoretical framework, I draw together a range of theoretical perspectives that attend to knowledge, imagination, affect, intuition and practice, alongside atmospheres, structures and infra-structures. These perspectives enable a nuanced account of sense-making as an affective, intuitive, and situated process, that is enacted through engagement with platform structures, cultural narratives, and lived experience.

The conceptual starting point of my theoretical framework is the imaginative dimensions of algorithmic sense-making, which contribute to understandings of how entrepreneurs navigate opaque systems. In this section I introduce socio-technical imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim 2016), the algorithmic imaginary (Bucher 2018), and collective forms of algorithmic sense-making that are grounded in algorithmic imaginaries. This includes algorithmic gossip (Bishop 2019), folk theories (Siles et

al. 2020), and stories about algorithms (Schellewald 2022). However, these accounts primarily focus on discursive forms of knowledge, that is what users say they believe or imagine about algorithms. They attend less closely to the intuitive, affective, and practice-based ways that users, especially online entrepreneurs, make sense of algorithmic systems. In contrast, my framework foregrounds the partial, affectively charged, and situated nature of algorithmic vibes, which are constructed through the entanglement of personal experience, social positioning, and the conditions of the platform economy.

Next, I draw on the work of Oman (2021) and Taylor et al. (2024) to conceptualise the process of understanding as one which moves between knowing and feeling. This provides a basis for thinking about algorithmic sense-making as unfolding across registers of knowledge, understanding, and awareness. To ground this argument, I first turn to affect as a foundational concept for theorising how sense-making is constructed through felt experience. In this thesis, I distinguish affect from related terms such as emotion and feeling, drawing on Bericat (2016) and Gregg and Seigworth (2010) to clarify how these categories are employed. I take up Ahmed's (2006) concept of orientation to examine how affective and emotional responses to algorithms acquire direction and become entangled with the ways individuals lean toward or withdraw from particular practices. This is central to my conceptualisation of algorithmic vibes as a form of orientation to algorithmic systems.

I incorporate Pedwell's work on intuition (Pedwell 2017) to theorise how participants come to 'know' algorithms through forms of intuitive understanding that are shaped by affective responses to platform conditions. To account for how algorithmic vibes are constructed through practice and social positioning, I draw on Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of habitus and practical mastery. These concepts help to explain how specific orientations to algorithmic systems are formulated through accumulated experience and social positioning. I also engage with Haraway's (1988) theory of situated knowledge to emphasise that all knowledge, including knowledge about algorithms, is produced from a particular location and shaped by intersecting structures of power, including those relating to gender, race, and class.

In the final part of my theoretical framework, I turn to theories of affective atmospheres (Anderson 2009), digital atmospheres (Ash 2013; Lupton 2017), and structures and infra-structures of feeling (Williams 1977; Coleman 2018). These concepts enable a shift in analytical scale, from the dispositions (*habitus*) and orientations of individual entrepreneurs to the ambient, affective, and temporal conditions within which algorithmic vibes are constructed. They make it possible for me to account for the wider moods, anticipations, and affective textures that circulate through platform environments and condition entrepreneurial practice.

Together, these theoretical perspectives are synthesised in my conceptualisation of algorithmic vibes as affective and intuitive, speculative and anticipatory, and situated orientations that are constructed in relation to platform conditions and everyday entrepreneurs' position within society and the platform economy. This framework underpins my analysis of how algorithmic sense-making unfolds amongst everyday women entrepreneurs and provides a foundation for addressing my four research questions.

1.4 The Concept of Algorithmic Vibes

The concept of vibes is used widely in everyday language and is especially prominent in digital spaces, where it conveys affective and atmospheric qualities of encounters, content, and environments (James 2021; Kender 2022). As James (2021) notes, the term is used to express a wide range of orientations and moods, ranging from ambience and material surroundings to social position, intention, and state of mind, that together shape how people experience and anticipate situations. Similarly, Kender (2022) notes that the vibe of a space describes “the emotional ‘vibrations’ given off by the combination of the people within a space and the space itself” (p. 2). In these usages, “vibes” operates as an intuitive and affective shorthand for sensing and communicating atmosphere and relational mood.

Within sociology, vibes has also begun to appear as an emerging analytical term. Miles (2022) proposed a “Sociology of Vibes” in their study of racial structures and the emotional *habitus* of Black people in North Carolina, USA. Here, vibes are

described as “the process in which Black southerners use the felt experience of their social location to understand social structures,” and as a “collective communicative system used to name experiences that standard emotive language fails to approximate” (p. 367). For Miles, the concept of vibes draws attention to the unindexed, affective, and bodily dimensions of social life, those moments and sensations through which inequality is lived and understood.

Parallel discussions can be found in digital media and communication studies. Brown et al. (2024) describe how digital advertising is algorithmically tuned to optimise vibes, defined as a combination of symbolic, aesthetic, and contextual elements that together generate a particular mood or resonance. Lupinacci (2024) argues that vibes is an analytically useful term that highlights the mediation and commodification of affect. She defines vibes as the “externalisation and collectivisation of moods... a mediated affective form of co-subjectivity,” through which users orient themselves collectively via shared energy rather than shared cognition (pp. 1–2). In Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), Kender (2022) conceptualises vibes as a way of reflecting on the atmosphere or character of digital public spaces, suggesting that platforms emit distinct vibes that are experienced and interpreted by users.

In this thesis, the concept of vibes developed through my engagement with participants’ accounts alongside these emerging literatures. It took shape over the course of this research, emerging through participants’ accounts and in dialogue with broader discursive and scholarly contexts. Two participants used the term directly. One described particular platforms as having “positive” or “negative” vibes, in a way that resonated with Kender’s (2022) work on digital atmospheres. Another used vibes to explain how she senses whether her social media posts are performing well. These moments were notable because they reflected wider themes in my analysis around affect, intuition, and atmosphere. This led me to take up vibes as a concept that could help articulate how participants make sense of algorithms in the context of everyday entrepreneurship.

In developing algorithmic vibes as a central concept, my interpretation aligns with and also departs from existing approaches. Whereas some accounts suggest that

vibes emanate from platforms or environments and are received by users, I conceptualise algorithmic vibes as orientations that are co-constructed by users and platforms. Users are not passive recipients of the atmospheres and moods produced by platforms but are active participants in shaping, interpreting, and negotiating them. Algorithmic vibes therefore describe the dynamic processes through which users engage with platform logics and navigate visibility and meaning within algorithmic systems.

My use of the concept of algorithmic vibes builds on scholarship in feminist media studies and the sociology of labour, which has examined how affect, visibility, and value are negotiated within digital economies (e.g. Gill 2010; Duffy 2017; Banet-Weiser 2018; Bennet 2024). These literatures show that women's digital work is shaped by the entanglement of emotional, aesthetic, and economic practices. Despite this work, little attention has been paid to how everyday women entrepreneurs interpret and feel their way through algorithmic systems. My thesis, and algorithmic vibes as its central conceptual contribution, extends these debates by shifting focus from sense-making practices that are freely articulated, often through collective discourse, to the affective, intuitive, and situated dimensions of algorithmic sense-making, showing how everyday women entrepreneurs anticipate, interpret, and respond to algorithmic conditions as part of their everyday labour of visibility.

1.5 Research Design

I investigate the relationship between algorithmic sense-making and social media practices in order to further understanding of everyday women entrepreneurs' lived experiences of algorithmically-mediated visibility and the relationship algorithmic sense-making has with participants' entrepreneurial practices. In order to critically evaluate pervasive discourses about women's digital entrepreneurship, such as narratives of meritocracy, my thesis also explores the differences that exist between different groups of women with regards to their algorithmic sense-making and social media practices.

In my thesis, I address the following research questions:

1. How do everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms on a range of social media platforms?
2. What is the nature of the relationship between everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and their social media practices?
3. What differences, if any, exist amongst different everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and social media practices?
4. What is the relationship between platform structures and logics and the algorithmic sense-making and social media practices of everyday women entrepreneurs?

My research was inspired by my own experiences as a woman entrepreneur, and my academic engagement with feminist debates on platform labour, capitalism, and gender during my MA studies. For several years, I ran a small digital marketing business and became actively involved in a number of women-in-business and women entrepreneur communities. Through these spaces, I began to notice a recurring pattern: many of the women I spoke to were running small-scale businesses and wanted to grow their online presence, but lacked the financial resources to pay for professional support. This meant they were trying to learn how to use social media themselves, often through trial and error, while juggling all the other demands of running a small business, from client work and administration to childcare and domestic responsibilities. In response to this problem, I began offering training and coaching specifically for women entrepreneurs, helping them learn how to use social media, develop marketing strategies, create content and analyse metrics. In doing so, I witnessed and experienced first-hand the challenges women were facing, not just in learning digital tools, but in managing visibility under conditions of economic constraint, platform opacity, and particular social expectations. What stood out to me was the lack of targeted support that addressed these challenges from a gendered perspective. This realisation made me wonder how women navigated this gap and was central to the development of my research.

As a feminist researcher, my commitment to making women's experiences visible, and to critically examining the systems that shape those experiences, inspired this study and informed how I approached the collection, analysis, and presentation of data. I centred the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs, particularly their everyday struggles with maintaining visibility on social media, navigating algorithmic opacity, and performing the continuous self-promotion and audience engagement often demanded by digital platforms. I treated participants' intuitive, affective, and experiential accounts as legitimate and analytically meaningful, resisting epistemic hierarchies that privilege technical or institutional expertise (Alcoff and Potter 1993; Code 1991; Harding 1987). I also designed the research with the aim of producing knowledge that is meaningful and usable for women entrepreneurs themselves, including plans to share findings through events, podcasts, and collaborations with support organisations.

I agree with Bryman's (2012) view that a researcher's values are inextricable from the research process, and as such, I engaged in ongoing reflexive practice throughout the study – I give two examples below. Drawing on Dwyer and Buckle's (2009) concept of 'the space between', I acknowledge that while I share some characteristics with my participants, I nevertheless occupy the role of researcher, which places me in a position that is both insider and outsider. My embeddedness within the field of women's entrepreneurship and self-employment in the UK provided access to participants, familiarity with the language and norms of the community, and a basis for building rapport. However, my academic and professional background meant I often viewed algorithms and social media marketing through a different lens to my participants. For example, while participants frequently expressed belief in the meritocratic logic of social media platforms, albeit not always using that terminology, I hold a more critical view informed by existing literature and my prior research. Aware of this difference in our perspectives, during my research, I felt that it was important that I did not impose my own interpretations of algorithms on my participants, but instead listened carefully and respectfully to participants' views. I was also aware that participants might alter their responses in light of my perceived expertise. This was most evident when participants hesitated or sought reassurance when answering a question I asked them about what their understanding of the term 'social media algorithm' was. In response, I clarified that there were no right or

wrong answers, and reaffirmed this after they had responded to the question, in order to mitigate participants feeling that they were being judged. These reflexive efforts were vital in building trust and fostering open dialogue, as well as ensuring that participants' knowledge and understandings were treated as epistemically meaningful, rather than measured against external standards of expertise.

My research is grounded in a qualitative methodology. It is informed by an interpretivist epistemology that views knowledge as emergent from lived experience and social and cultural contexts, rather than being fixed or objective (Goldbart and Hustler 2005). Based on this epistemology, I endeavour to understand how everyday women entrepreneurs assign meaning to algorithms and how this meaning-making shapes their practices. I combine this with a constructivist epistemology, where knowledge is viewed as actively constructed by individuals, with meaning being shaped by their prior experiences, social positioning, and cultural understandings (Denicolo et al 2016)

Based on this epistemology, participants in this study are centered as meaning-makers. The research methodology is therefore focused on understanding how participants make sense of the social and technological worlds they "inhabit, construct, and utilise" (Goldbart and Hustler 2005, p. 16). This commitment aligns with feminist approaches to knowledge production, which reject hierarchies between researcher and participant and emphasise the epistemic authority of lived experience (Harding 1987; Code 1991). My study examines the recursive relationship between meaning and practice; how participants' understandings of social media algorithms are constructed through, and in turn inform, their everyday digital practices. I adopt an ethnomethodological approach, which broadly describes research that prioritises the collection of data about individuals' experiences using methods such as interviews and observation, and that emphasises description and narrative in the presentation of findings (Somekh and Lewin 2005). This approach shares important affinities with feminist qualitative research, particularly in its attentiveness to context, everyday practice, and the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Accordingly, qualitative data was

collected via semi-structured interviews, ongoing online communication with participants, and online participant observation.

Data was collected primarily through 28 semi-structured interviews conducted between February and December 2023. Interview participants were women entrepreneurs who are based in the UK, and they came from a diverse range of backgrounds. The majority of interviews were conducted online, with one taking place in person, and they each lasted 30-90 minutes.

At the end of each interview, participants were invited to contact me with any further reflections or updates they wished to share in the following months. Several participants continued to communicate with me via email and/or messaging apps, providing periodic updates about their businesses, social media activity, and algorithm sense-making. With the consent of participants, these messages are included in the data set.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

My thesis is organised into eight chapters, including this introductory chapter. In Chapter Two I present my literature review, which begins by situating everyday entrepreneurship and digital labour in the context of the platform economy. The literature review then moves on to discuss existing literature relating to women's entrepreneurship, highlighting three key themes: neoliberalism, postfeminism and an ethos of meritocracy. I then review extant literature about algorithms as socio-technical constructs that govern visibility on digital platforms. I proceed to outline existing literature about the ways in which women entrepreneurs attempt to make sense of algorithms, highlighting the predominant focus on social media influencers and professional content creators. Finally, the chapter reflects on the gendered nature of algorithmic sense-making and visibility, and the role that metrics, as a form of platform feedback, play in algorithmic sense-making. The chapter concludes by highlighting gaps in knowledge and how the research questions for this study have been formulated to address those gaps.

Chapter Three develops the theoretical framework for this thesis by bringing together a set of carefully selected concepts, which I introduced in Section 1.3, that work in concert to theorise algorithmic sense-making and practice. It culminates in my original contribution: the concept of algorithmic vibes, which I define as affective and intuitive, speculative and anticipatory, and situated orientations constructed through the entanglement of lived experience, social positioning, and platform conditions. While Chapter Two reviews existing literature on the platform economy, women's entrepreneurship, digital labour, and algorithmic sense-making, Chapter Three sets out the conceptual tools I use to interpret participants' accounts. The theoretical framework is organised around four thematic strands: (1) imagining algorithms and platform systems, (2) knowledge, understanding, and awareness, (3) constructing orientation through affect, intuition, and practice, and (4) the affective atmospheres, structures, and infra-structures of platform environments.

In Chapter Four, I document the methodology that was employed in this study. I explain why qualitative methods were most appropriate to investigate the algorithmic sense-making of everyday women entrepreneurs. I outline my positionality, as an academic and woman entrepreneur, and how this motivated my study. I reflect on the impact of my positionality on the research process, and the steps I took to integrate reflexivity throughout the project. I move on to detail how semi-structured interviews were conducted, including participant sampling and recruitment and interview protocols. I reflect on the challenges of online participant observation, which generated a very small amount of data due to challenges in accessing closed online spaces. I explain in detail how ethical principles were adhered to in all stages of the study. Finally, I document how data analysis was carried out.

The thesis progresses with three empirical chapters (Chapter 5-7) which address my research questions. Chapter Five explores the entanglement between algorithmic sense-making, digital practices and platform structures. I propose the concept of algorithmic vibes as a model for algorithmic sense-making that provides a lens through which everyday women entrepreneurs interpret and navigate social media algorithms, and the relationship this has with their digital practices. In this chapter, I make the argument for algorithmic vibes as affective and intuitive orientations. I also explain how algorithmic vibes relate platform design, governance and structures with

user experiences and practices, shedding light on the relationship between platform structures and logics and the algorithmic sense-making of everyday women-entrepreneurs (RQ4).

Chapter Six examines how everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of platform metrics, such as reach, likes, and comments, and how these shape their digital practices. It argues that metrics are not simply read or analysed, but felt, interpreted, and lived with, often through affective and intuitive forms of sense-making. Building on Chapter Five's argument for algorithmic vibes as intuitive and affective orientations, in this chapter I posit that algorithmic vibes are also speculative and anticipatory. Throughout the chapter, I demonstrate that participants rarely treated metrics as objective indicators of success. Instead, they responded to them selectively and pragmatically, attuning to what felt meaningful in relation to their goals, values, and lived experience. While some engaged in structured data tracking, others prioritised relational signals like comments or direct messages, or disengaged from metrics altogether as a form of self-protection against algorithmic precarity. These orientations were shaped by habitus, confidence, technical skill, and platform governance structures, including monetisation thresholds and data-driven nudges. By foregrounding the affective and situated ways participants interpret platform feedback, the chapter extends the analytical reach of algorithmic vibes to account for how data is not just processed, but navigated, embodied, and selectively internalised through everyday platform labour.

The final empirical chapter, Chapter Seven, examines how algorithmic sense-making is unevenly experienced among everyday women entrepreneurs, demonstrating how differences in financial resources, time, professional identity, caregiving responsibilities, race and cultural positioning shape women's orientations toward platform logics and visibility practices. Building again on the concept of algorithmic vibes, the chapter shows that sense-making is not merely a matter of knowledge or strategy, but a situated and habituated process deeply entangled with structural inequalities, and social and entrepreneurial norms. While some participants developed intuitive and experimental approaches to navigating algorithmic logics, others experienced disillusionment, constraint, or ambivalence, particularly when platform norms clashed with their identities, values, or capacities. The chapter also

foregrounds the affective and gendered costs of digital visibility, including burnout, self-surveillance, and exposure to harassment, and highlights the labour of resistance, boundary-setting, and selective disengagement. In doing so, it extends the analytical reach of algorithmic vibes by tracing how they are unevenly distributed, negotiated, and constrained across different positions within the platform economy.

Chapter Eight concludes the thesis by revisiting the four research questions and drawing together the empirical and theoretical insights developed throughout. It consolidates the contribution of the concept of algorithmic vibes as a way of understanding how everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithmic systems through affective and intuitive, speculative and anticipatory, and situated practices. I demonstrate how the thesis contributes to debates about algorithmic culture, women's entrepreneurship, and gender, and an emerging body of literature on vibes in relation to digital platforms (Brown et al. 2024; Kender 2022; Lupinacci 2024). I also reflect on the epistemological and methodological contributions of the study. The chapter ends by acknowledging the limitations of the research and outlining directions for future research and engagement.

In the next chapter, I review existing literature on the platform economy, women's entrepreneurship, digital labour, and algorithmic sense-making, to situate my study within current academic debates and identify the conceptual gaps that my research seeks to address.

Chapter Two - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The purposes of my research project are two-fold. First, to investigate how self-employed women in the UK attempt to make sense of algorithms when using social media (RQ1), and, second, to examine the relationship between this sense-making and their social media practices (RQ2). The project also considers how this relationship is constructed through broader platform structures and logics of platform governance that organise participation and visibility online (RQ4). Finally, I explore what, if any, differences exist amongst everyday women entrepreneurs, attending to how these differences are constructed in relation to their position within society and the platform economy (RQ3).

Online visibility, which is governed by algorithmic decision making, has a significant impact on everyday entrepreneurs' ability to generate revenue. As a result, how women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms, and the relationship this sense-making has with their online visibility practices, is a crucial area of inquiry. This project addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on the situated algorithmic sense-making of everyday women entrepreneurs and its relationship to social media practices.

There is a burgeoning body of research that addresses digital labour and, specifically, women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making. This existing literature, particularly in reference to women's digital work, focuses predominantly on high profile social media influencers, creative workers and gig workers, as I will go on to outline. However, there is another category of women's work that is shaped by digital media but has received little academic attention. I refer to this as 'everyday entrepreneurship'. Everyday entrepreneurship encompasses entrepreneurs who operate on a smaller scale, in roles that have been largely overlooked in existing research. This includes women entrepreneurs who operate their businesses mostly, if not entirely, online such as remote admin assistants, bookkeepers and

proofreaders. It also includes women entrepreneurs who generate work through online marketing but deliver services in the offline world, such as hairdressers, cleaners and dog groomers.

I begin the literature review by situating everyday entrepreneurship and digital labour within the broader context of the platform economy, because this provides the structural and conceptual foundation for understanding how entrepreneurial visibility is pursued, experienced, and made viable through platform participation. As algorithmic sense-making is entangled with the economic and affective conditions of platform work, it is crucial to understand the broader dynamics that shape the opportunities and constraints experienced by everyday women entrepreneurs. I then examine existing research on women's entrepreneurship, with a particular focus on how neoliberal, postfeminist, and meritocratic discourses shape entrepreneurial subjectivities. I go on to discuss why online visibility has been identified as a fraught issue for women entrepreneurs and the role that algorithms play as visibility gatekeepers on digital platforms. Finally, I review literature about algorithmic sense-making and the ways in which pursuits of online visibility are gendered, before discussing the significance of metrics as forms of platform feedback that offer users partial insight into algorithmic logics.

2.2 The Platform Economy

Digital platforms play a significant role in the social and economic lives of many people throughout the world. This phenomenon has engendered debate about the nature of digital work in a capitalist society, where platforms mediate everything from social relationships and work, to financial transactions and practices of self-presentation.

Platforms are described by Evans and Schmalensee (2016) as 'matchmakers' that facilitate connections between members of different groups. For example, Uber connects passengers to drivers. In this new economic arrangement, platforms are not trading a physical product but selling access to different groups of people. Digital platforms operate across a wide variety of domains and include companies such as Amazon, eBay, Kickstarter, Facebook and Google (Grabher and van Tuijl 2020).

The ways in which digital platforms have become central to the infrastructure and economy of the internet is commonly referred to as platformisation (Helmond 2015).

Langley and Leyshon (2017) highlight the swift expansion of “platform intermediation” over the past 15-20 years and argue that it has given rise to ‘platform capitalism’. Platform capitalism refers to platforms, as socio-technical intermediaries, being integrated into “wider processes of capitalisation” (p. 12). Other scholars, such as Rochet and Tirole (2003), have used the term ‘platform economy’ to refer to this new, and now prevailing, type of economic arrangement. Langley and Leyshon (2017) identify five different aspects of the platform economy, which they term ‘domains of circulation’. These are; Online exchange markets (such as Etsy or Amazon Marketplace, where goods and services are bought and sold), Social media and user-generated content (including platforms like Instagram and YouTube, where visibility and engagement are monetised), Sharing economy (encompassing peer-to-peer service models like Airbnb), Crowdsourcing (where labour or content is outsourced to distributed participants) and Crowdfunding / P2P lending (where capital is raised directly from the public via platforms like Kickstarter).

The focus of this project is on social media and user-generated content. However, it is important to note that domains of circulation are not discrete, and self-employed women may well ‘circulate’ across multiple domains simultaneously. For example, an individual might use an online marketplace such as Etsy (an online exchange market) to sell their products whilst also using social media platforms and user-generated content to promote their Etsy shop or provide an alternative channel through which they sell their products. They might also use a crowdfunding platform, such as Kickstarter, to raise funds to develop a new product.

Liang et al (2022) argue that neoliberal logics are central to the platform economy. Springer et al (2016) provide a useful summary of this complex and multifaceted concept:

“When we make reference to ‘neoliberalism’, we are generally referring to the new political, economic, and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual

responsibility. Most scholars tend to agree that neoliberalism is broadly defined as the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics and society” (p. 31).

Neoliberalism is often seen to include the diminishing role of the state in ensuring the economic prosperity of citizens, which results in individuals being expected to take primary responsibility for their own success. In a platform economy, Liang et al (2022) argue, individuals are coordinated by digital platforms. Gill (2010) argues that neoliberalism and the platform economy have produced a new ideal worker subject. This neoliberal worker is “self-sacrificing, self-directed [and] entrepreneurial” and their experience of work is “characterised by risk, insecurity and contingency” (p. 250-251). I draw on this understanding of neoliberalism throughout this literature review and argue that neoliberal logics have played a central role in academic and mainstream discussions about women’s digital entrepreneurship.

Building on this discussion of the platform economy, the next section considers how self-employment and entrepreneurship are constructed in gendered ways, beginning with definitions of these terms, before turning to the gender self-employment gap and the influence of postfeminist discourses in shaping entrepreneurial subjectivities.

2.3 Women, Work and Entrepreneurship

2.3.1 Defining Self-employment and Entrepreneurship

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, in the United Kingdom (UK), HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC 2022a) categorises a person as self-employed based on two main criteria; “if they run a business for themselves and take responsibility for its success or failure” and they “are not paid through ‘Pay As You Earn’ (PAYE) and do not have the rights and responsibilities of an employee”. Someone who is self-employed will be registered with HMRC as either a sole-trader, that is they operate a business on their own, or a partnership, meaning they share responsibility for the business with a partner or partners (HMRC 2022b).

There is also a third category of worker that is relevant to discussions of self-employment and business ownership: company director. As with self-employment, company directors are responsible for running a business but their rights and responsibilities differ from both employees and the self-employed, and they may choose to pay themselves a salary through PAYE (HMRC 2022c). Although a company director is not technically self-employed, based on the definition provided above, their lived experience may be very similar to that of a self-employed person. For example, a company director does not necessarily employ staff and may therefore operate in a similar way to a sole trader. Meanwhile, a sole trader or partnership business may employ staff, occupying the roles of employer and self-employed simultaneously (HMRC 2022d).

In this study, the term self-employed refers to individuals who run their own businesses and bear responsibility for their success or failure. This includes those operating as sole traders, in partnerships, or as directors of limited companies.

It is also important to delineate what is meant by the term entrepreneur and how it relates to self-employment. There is considerable debate surrounding the term entrepreneur and no consensus as to how it should be defined (Eroglu and Picak 2011). Schumpeter's (1980) definition focuses on innovation as a means of exploiting new market opportunities. He characterises entrepreneurship as a transient identity which concludes when the individual "settles" into the more long-term endeavour of running an established business (p. 78). Bessant and Tidd (2015) also identify the importance of innovation and the role of the entrepreneur who makes innovation happen (p. 11). They define entrepreneurs as risk-takers who "calculate the costs of taking a bright idea forward against the potential gains if they succeed in doing something different" (p. 6). Potential gains need not necessarily refer to profit, they state, but can include any tangible potential benefit, for example an improvement to the entrepreneur's quality of life. Meanwhile, Brockhaus' definition concentrates on the ownership and management of a business, disregarding innovation as a prerequisite of entrepreneurship and enabling individuals to continue to be defined as entrepreneurs once their business has progressed from new venture to established organisation (Brockhaus 1980, p. 510). It is therefore important to be clear what definitions are being operationalised in this

research project. Drawing on Brockhaus' (1980), I define entrepreneurship as the ownership and management of a business, with or without innovation, and responsibility for its success or failure, as in the definition of self-employment above. I also agree with Bessant and Tidd (2015) that the gains made from entrepreneurship may include profit, but can also include other gains such as the ability to work part-time or to work flexibly.

Furthermore, academic definitions of entrepreneurship are not necessarily consistent with how self-employed people define entrepreneurship and whether or not they identify as entrepreneurs themselves. In my MA dissertation research I found that many participants did not identify with the term entrepreneur, preferring to use terms such as small business owner or sole trader (Ruddock 2021).

Having outlined how self-employment and entrepreneurship are defined within this thesis, I now turn to the gendered patterns of participation in entrepreneurial work, focusing on the persistent and well-documented gender self-employment gap.

2.3.2 The Gender Self-Employment Gap

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has identified a persistent global gender gap in self-employment (OECD 2021). This means that women are 50% less likely to enter into business than men. They are also less likely to be active in 'growth-oriented sectors' and to create jobs for other people (p. 65). Some progress has been made towards closing the self-employed gender gap in the UK, as the number of self-employed women increased by 65% between 2008 and 2024 (IPSE 2024). Most of the growth in women's self-employment in the UK in recent years has been amongst ethnic minority women, disabled women and women over the age of 50 (Watson 2020). Nevertheless, women are still less likely to be self-employed than men, with only between 35% (House of Commons Library 2025) and 39% (IPSE 2024) of the UK self-employed workforce being women by the end of 2024.

The gender self-employment gap concerns not only the unequal proportion of women in self-employment compared to men, but also the nature of self-employment activities, which is often highly gendered (OECD 2021). There are key differences in the sectors that self-employed women and self-employed men work in, with women more likely to work in creative roles, such as arts and media, hairdressing and related occupations, cleaning and education. By contrast, men are more likely to work in construction and building, transportation, agriculture and management (Watson 2020). These female-dominated sectors were most affected by national lockdowns and social restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to some of the progress towards closing the gender self-employment being reversed (OECD 2021). Relatedly, Martinez Dy and Jayawarna (2020) highlighted that socially marginalised groups, including women from ‘backgrounds of colour’ and LGBTQIA+ people, are more likely to become self-employed when there is contraction in the labour market, such as during a recession or global pandemic (as in the case of COVID-19). This suggests that socially marginalised workers may enter self-employment due to a lack of better options, regardless of whether it is in their best interests economically and socially.

In a briefing for the Commission of a Gender-Equal Economy, the Women’s Budget Group identified low-pay and lack of economic security as issues for approximately one third of self-employed people in general and argued that women are over-represented in this group of precarious self-employed workers (Watson 2020). In addition, self-employed women in the UK are significantly more likely to work part-time than men. Watson (2020) argues that this is usually based on a need to balance unpaid caring and domestic responsibilities with employment; a burden which is carried predominantly by women. Likewise, Bari et al (2021) identified similar gendered trends in solo self-employment in Ireland; by solo self-employment they are referring to self-employed workers without employees, much like the ‘everyday women entrepreneurs’ who are the focus of this thesis. Bari et al found that, compared to men, women in solo self-employment are significantly more likely to work part-time, from home and be combining self-employment with unpaid caring responsibilities. They conclude, therefore, that solo self-employment is often necessitated and shaped by gender norms, particularly discourses of “work-life balance” which tend to focus on women’s work, much more so than men’s.

There is also a growing 'side-hustle' culture, where an individual undertakes self-employed work alongside other paid-employment and/or caring and domestic responsibilities (Sessions et al. 2021). Although side-hustles are often portrayed as an empowering means of securing additional income, especially for women, research by Scott et al. (2020) highlights that such work rarely alleviates household poverty and often reinforces gendered inequalities, as women remain constrained by care responsibilities and structural labour market conditions. Additionally, recent figures show that only 21% of all side hustles in the UK are operated by working mums, an increase of 8% between 2023 and 2024 (IPSE 2024). As Singh and Darrall (2019) conclude: "for an increasing percentage of women, self-employment is not a choice but rather a necessity in the face of various economic forces" (p. 12). Taking these trends into account, self-employment has been described as a route into low-paid work for some women (Women's Budget Group 2024b). This perspective, which challenges views of self-employment as an empowering, flexible and rewarding route into work, I discuss in the next section.

2.3.3 Postfeminism and Entrepreneurship

Central to postfeminism is the idea that gender equality has been achieved (McRobbie 2009) and that persistent inequalities are the consequence of biological differences between men and women or the choices made by individual women (Gill 2017). Hence, postfeminism emphasises individual responsibility for success (and failure), which aligns neatly with the self-responsibilised neoliberal ideal worker subject described by Gill (2010) and discussed above (Section 2.2).

Postfeminism is said to dominate discussions of women's entrepreneurship and influence Government policies relating to self-employment and enterprise in many countries, including the UK (e.g. Ahl and Marlow 2021; Byrne et al 2019). Lewis (2014) argues that postfeminism has facilitated the rise of individualised entrepreneurial femininity; a term she uses to describe a subjectivity that presents success as a matter of personal ambition, effort, and adherence to supposedly gender-neutral business practices. This reflects a broader postfeminist logic in which structural inequalities are obscured, and femininity is reconfigured as a

strategic resource rather than something that limits women. By this logic, femininity is understood not as an essence, but as a set of performative traits that can be selectively mobilised to align with dominant entrepreneurial norms. Drawing on a postfeminist sensibility characterised by individualism, choice, and empowerment, Lewis shows how this entrepreneurial subjectivity is situated between neoliberal feminism and feminine normativity. She cautions, however, that the valorisation of feminine attributes does not necessarily translate into material advantage, and may even reproduce gendered inequalities under the guise of empowerment. This is consistent with an ethos of meritocracy, which pervades both postfeminism and neoliberalism, where success is perceived as mostly inevitable for an individual who is capable and hard-working (Gill 2014).

A number of scholars have argued that these kinds of postfeminist narratives have influenced policy initiatives in the UK, resulting in an emphasis on encouraging women to rely on their agency, skills, and reputation to achieve entrepreneurial success (Byrne et al 2019; Ahl and Marlow 2021). This is problematic, according to Ahl and Marlow (2021) who conducted a comparative analysis of enterprise policy discourse in Sweden and the UK, because it neglects to address persistent structural inequalities that disadvantage women entrepreneurs. They argue that postfeminist enterprise policy discourses have reframed entrepreneurship as a “woman-friendly” solution that accommodates women’s caring responsibilities, positioning it as a flexible and empowering alternative to traditional employment. Consequently, the expectation that women take responsibility for most domestic labour is under-scrutinised and responsibility for success or failure (whilst maintaining work-life balance) is placed primarily on the individual entrepreneur.

A meritocratic ethos also pervades discourses relating to digital entrepreneurship, understood here as the use of digital media and online communication technologies to pursue opportunities for paid work (Davidson and Vaast 2010). In media reports and popular discourse, digital technologies are often praised for removing traditional barriers to women’s entrepreneurship by providing flexibility, the ability to work from home, low start-up costs, a means of reaching a global network of customers, new opportunities to generate revenue and greater access to peer support (Byrne and Giuliani 2025). Some entrepreneurship literature also reinforces these claims by

framing digital platforms as tools that empower women to pursue business opportunities on their own terms, often presenting self-employment as a flexible and accessible pathway to financial independence and work–life balance (Best et al. 2024). Martinez Dy et al (2017) term this “meritocratic opportunity enactment”, whereby digital technologies are said to create a level playing field for women as entrepreneurs (p. 286).

In light of prevailing discourses, that success or failure is down to an entrepreneur's individual ability and hard work, support for women entrepreneurs is often focused on training. Foss et al (2018) assert that this perpetuates a view that women entrepreneurs need to be improved or “fixed”. Thus, “woman-friendly” entrepreneurship might attempt to accommodate, but not challenge, the uneven distribution of work and caregiving responsibilities between men and women. They challenge this approach by arguing that entrepreneurship is a gendered phenomenon and new knowledge needs to be generated in order to create more “effective ecosystems for women's entrepreneurship” (p. 410). Likewise, Marlow (2020) describe the prevailing discourse in enterprise policy as ‘feminised entrepreneurial deficiency’, which aims to “fit women into entrepreneurship rather than questioning how entrepreneurship might fit women” (p. 42). Marlow summarises this as the view that “women just need to try harder” and “if only women were more like men!” (p. 40-41).

Additionally, Martinez Dy and Jayawarna (2020) argue that entrepreneurship discourse has been overly influenced by a hegemonic view of ‘the entrepreneur’ as White and male, despite the diversity of people who are entrepreneurs and the differences and inequalities that exist between groups. This can be understood in relation to postfeminist discourses which suggest that persistent inequalities are due primarily to biological differences between men and women and an individual's abilities and work ethos (Gill 2017). Ahl and Marlow (2021) allude to this when discussing their analysis of national enterprise documents from the UK and Sweden. They found that the idea of refashioning entrepreneurship into a ‘woman-friendly form’ perpetuates the view that women entrepreneurs are “different from and weaker than men” (p. 46). Overall, Marlow (2020) terms this the ‘makeover paradigm’, which encourages women entrepreneurs to be more like men. The emphasis is on

women overcoming gendered structural constraints individually by using their own skills and initiative, rather than the structural constraints being challenged or dismantled.

Martinez Dy et al (2017) argue that claims of meritocracy are flawed because they obscure the structural inequalities which lead to differential outcomes amongst entrepreneurs. Specifically, they point to the ways in which an individual's social position, as determined by their gender, ethnicity, class and so on, can disadvantage them as entrepreneurs, just as social position creates disadvantage and inequality in other contexts. Martinez Dy et al (2017) conclude that social inequalities are not overcome by digital technologies but, instead, tend to be reproduced and, in some cases, exacerbated in online spaces.

In their study of self-employed women and women-owned businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, Martinez Dy and Jayawarna (2020) found inequalities to be evident in the UK. They found that socially marginalised and structurally disadvantaged individuals commonly turn to self-employment in response to an unstable and insecure labour market. Yet, as noted in the introduction, “the entrepreneurial activity of those who exist as ‘Other’ become invisible”, this encompasses “women, people of colour, poor, working-class, disabled and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA) self-employed and entrepreneurial individuals” (p. 395). They observed that individuals who are disadvantaged by structural inequality because of intersecting social identities, including ethnicity, age, class and dis/ability, often experienced more challenges than others. Their conclusion is that women at “categorical intersections, such as Black and women of colour from poor and working class backgrounds, are more likely to be the most structurally disadvantaged” (p. 396). These findings are consistent with Bryrne et al (2019), who argue that an “individualistic, neo-liberal ‘everybody is capable’ view of entrepreneurship” privileges certain groups of women entrepreneurs at the expense of others who are disadvantaged for reasons other than, and in addition to, their gender (p. 155).

On digital platforms, algorithms function as gatekeepers of online visibility, extending postfeminist and meritocratic logics into digital environments. Therefore, I now turn

to examine how algorithmic systems structure opportunity, reward visibility, and reproduce inequalities that affect women digital entrepreneurs.

2.4 Algorithms, Society and Digital Entrepreneurship

2.4.1 Algorithms as Socio-Technical Constructs

Algorithms are a ubiquitous feature of modern life in a technological society and, as such, their influence on society has become an increasingly important topic of research for social researchers (Gillespie 2014; Bucher 2017; Beer 2017).

Algorithms are defined by Gillespie (2014) as “encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output, based on specific calculations”; they “name both a problem and the steps by which it can be solved” (p. 167). Kitchin (2017) identifies the two core elements of an algorithm as logic (“what is to be done”) and control (“how it should be done”) (p. 16-17). Kitchin goes on to argue that algorithms have become ubiquitous because they are able to tackle large and complex tasks that would be difficult, if not impossible, for human actors or analogue machines to complete. Often, these tasks include recommendation, profiling and predicting (Kitchin 2017). To put it simply, as Goffey (2008) does, “algorithms do things”.

These definitions capture the technical functions of algorithms, yet scholars have emphasised that their societal implications depend on where and how they are deployed. In the context of digital media, algorithms are encountered by online entrepreneurs across a wide range of digital platforms, including social media, online marketplaces, search engines and media/news platforms (Duffy 2020). On these platforms, algorithms act as information intermediaries that make automated decisions about what content to present to each user and, therefore, who and what is visible (Cotter and Reisdorf 2020).

However, the logic of algorithms and how they make decisions about who and what to make visible on digital platforms is deliberately obscured by platforms. As Bucher (2018) argues, “algorithms are made to be opaque” (p. 41), not only because of their technical complexity, but also due to their status as proprietary technologies. Pasquale (2015) uses the metaphor of the “black box” to describe this opacity. He

explains that we can observe an algorithm's inputs and outputs, but the inner workings, which decide what is shown, hidden, prioritised or excluded, remain hidden. Bucher (2018) highlights how the opacity, complexity, and frequent reconfiguration of algorithms makes it difficult for users to comprehend algorithms and their effects. This is particularly consequential in contexts where algorithmic decisions influence access to visibility, resources, or opportunity, as in the case of social media platforms.

A further issue is that algorithms are often presented by platforms as purely technical, neutral, and objective; what Gillespie (2014) refers to as "the promise of platform objectivity" (p. 179). In reality, algorithms are never purely technical; they are inscribed with judgements about what is valuable, relevant, or deserving of attention. As a growing body of research demonstrates, this can result in systematic biases that reproduce social inequalities (e.g. Noble 2018; Criado Perez 2020). Gillespie (2014) argues that platforms benefit economically by portraying their algorithms as neutral and impartial, and by positioning themselves as passive intermediaries rather than active gatekeepers. This framing not only builds user trust, but also obscures the ways in which human values and assumptions are embedded in algorithmic design. Understanding algorithms as both technical tools and products of social and institutional choices reflects a socio-technical perspective that is foundational to critical algorithm studies.

While Gillespie (2014) highlights how platforms benefit economically by presenting themselves as neutral intermediaries, Just and Latzer (2017) go further by examining how algorithms function as tools of value extraction within the platform economy. They argue that algorithmic decision-making serves not only to sort and rank information but to produce outcomes aligned with the commercial interests of platform owners. In doing so, algorithms help construct a reality shaped by neoliberal logics, where individualisation, competition and commercialisation are prioritised. This political-economic framing of algorithmic systems provides important context for understanding the discursive strategies platforms use to reinforce their authority, as I explain below.

Petre et al. (2019), for example, contend that platform providers present themselves “as neutral actors working to uphold the ideals of authenticity and integrity” (p. 1). They label this as “platform paternalism”, a mode of governance that positions platforms as benevolent overseers responsible for guiding user behaviour. This paternalism imbues platforms with structural and economic power, and moral authority, over visibility and monetisation by framing their algorithmic interventions as necessary for protecting community standards and promoting fairness (p. 2). Petre et al. go on to connect platform paternalism with accusations of user manipulation of algorithms, widely referred to as “gaming the system” (p. 2). They argue that platforms use paternalistic discourses to delimit and police boundaries of acceptable user behaviour. Thus, user attempts to improve their visibility on a platform are seen by platforms as manipulating an algorithm, and described by platforms in terms of “contamination, crime/moral deviance, and cheating”, deserving of punishment (p. 9). This has important implications for algorithmic power because it obscures how platforms are motivated by economic self-interest and legitimates the algorithmic governance of platform users. By presenting content moderation and visibility management as moral imperatives, in service of fairness, authenticity, or integrity, platforms justify their algorithmic interventions as protective rather than profit-driven. This obscures the commercial logics underpinning algorithmic logics and deflects criticism by positioning users as the ones who must adapt.

Petre et al also argue that inequalities between cultural workers, by which they are referring to users who produce and publish online content in an attempt to make economic gains, are intensified by “the language of system-gaming” (p. 2). Platforms frame visibility as something that can be legitimately obtained through official channels, such as paid advertising. As a result, small businesses who lack the financial resources to access these paid services are more likely to be accused of, and potentially penalised for, attempting to “game the system”, while larger companies can pay for visibility through platform-sanctioned methods (p. 2). Cotter (2019) similarly critiques narratives of ‘gaming the system’ for their tendency to focus on “lone manipulators” rather than recognising that an “assemblage of actors - users, algorithms, and platform owners - ...all play a role in how users use a platform” (p. 899). Hence, Cotter proposes reframing ‘gaming the system’ as “playing the visibility

game” to better account for “the interplay between actors that acknowledges each actor’s individual role” (p. 899-900).

Many scholars suggest that algorithms should be understood as actors within socio-technical systems, in which users and content also play a crucial role (Rader and Gray 2015; Bucher 2018; Seaver 2017). Beer (2017) cautions against understanding algorithms as detached from the social world because they are produced within social, cultural and commercial contexts and embedded in everyday life. If this entanglement is not acknowledged, it may lead to algorithmic power being misjudged. For example, by overstating the rationality or objectivity of algorithms or overlooking how they are designed with specific social and economic outcomes in mind.

As Gillespie (2014) suggests, algorithms not only act but they are acted upon. Whilst algorithms are created by platforms and their software developers, they are continuously reformed by and through user interaction. Therefore, Gillespie argues that a ‘recursive loop’ exists, whereby algorithms influence user behaviour but algorithms are also rearticulated by the actions of users. Gillespie refers to this as ‘entanglement with practice’, by which he means the ways that users adjust their practices in response to algorithms, while also treating algorithms as sites of negotiation or contestation. This notion reflects the complex entanglement between algorithmic decision making and the digital practices of users on algorithmic platforms. Building on Gillespie’s argument, Bucher (2018) argues that although algorithms exert considerable power, this power is not unidirectional or simply imposed on users. Instead, algorithmic power is realised through the dynamic relationship between systems and users, as people interpret, respond to, and occasionally anticipate algorithmic processes in ways that contribute to how algorithmic systems operate and are perceived. With this in mind, Bucher (2018) suggests that algorithms should be considered as “entangled, multiple, and eventful” (p. 20); they shape social life not only through their output but also by the ways in which they are imagined by users and how this imagination influences how users interact with algorithms (Bucher 2017). Bucher (2017) defines ‘algorithmic imaginary’, a concept I discuss in depth in Chapter Three, as “ways of thinking about what algorithms are, what they should be, how they function and what these

imaginings in turn make possible” (p. 39-41). Additionally, Ditchfield et al (2024) define the term imagining as “building or creating a mental image of something that is not present in the moment of imagining” (p. 2025). I return to the role of imagination in Chapter Three, where I critically engage with the concepts of socio-technical and algorithmic imaginaries and develop an alternative framework for understanding sense-making that foregrounds intuition, orientation, and practice.

Understanding algorithms as actors in socio-technical systems that not only act but are acted upon by users, leads Seaver (2017) to propose that, rather than considering algorithms as stable objects or black boxes which we cannot access for investigation, algorithms should be recognised as multiple objects that are unstable, entangled with other actors and shaped by human practices. This idea is central to my theoretical approach to my study and research design. Hence, this project is not concerned with opening the ‘black box’ to understand the inner workings of the algorithm but, rather, with how algorithms, particularly social media algorithms, are interpreted and enacted by women entrepreneurs. In doing so, it adopts a socio-technical perspective that foregrounds practice, affect, and situated meaning-making on social media platforms.

With this understanding of algorithms as socio-technical systems, I now examine how women entrepreneurs construct meaning around algorithms in practice, and how this sense-making relates to visibility, labour, and platform participation.

2.4.2 Women Entrepreneurs and Algorithmic Sense-making

A growing body of research has explored how users navigate and make sense of algorithms (e.g. Bucher 2017; Siles et al 2020), but relatively little attention has been paid to how these dynamics unfold within the context of women’s everyday entrepreneurship. As Best et al. (2025) observe, “there is a paucity of research on the effects of digital technologies on the phenomenon of female entrepreneurship” (p. 66). Much of the literature to date has concentrated on highly visible figures such as social media influencers (e.g. Bishop 2019; Cotter 2019), or on freelance creative workers in cultural industries (e.g. Scolere et al 2018). The following section reviews this literature in order to situate my study within, and against, current understandings of algorithmic sense-making in gendered entrepreneurial contexts.

Much of the existing research on the algorithmic sense-making of women entrepreneurs has focused on a specific subset of digital entrepreneurs: social media influencers. These are individuals who have a large online following, which they leverage in order to generate financial income (Abidin 2016). The term ‘professional content creator’ is increasingly being used to refer to this group of entrepreneurial social media users, who Bishop (2023) describes as “ostensibly ordinary platform users who accrue followings on social media via “authentic” (yet stylised) coverage of their everyday lives” (p. 2). A common source of revenue amongst professional content creators is brand sponsorship deals, although it is becoming increasingly common for them to have multiple revenue streams which can include, for example, books, podcasts, merchandise and speaking engagements (Glatt 2022).

Professional content creators are predominantly women and have become a popular focus of research relating to women’s digital entrepreneurship (Duffy 2019).

Influencers’ visibility online and in the mainstream media could account for why they play such a dominant role in both academic research and public discourses about women’s digital entrepreneurship. And yet, influencers are only a subset of online entrepreneurs. Outside of the influencer / professional content creator category, a significant proportion of the academic research in this area has concentrated on freelance workers in creative industries, such as designers, writers and artists, who are generally referred as creative or cultural workers (e.g. Scolere et al 2018; Duffy 2020; Klawitter and Hargittai 2018).

Existing literature overlooks everyday women entrepreneurs who use social media to generate income and the ways in which the threat of invisibility shapes their social media practices. This project aims to address this gap in the literature by addressing the questions of how do everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms on a range of social media platforms (RQ1) and what is the nature of the relationship between everyday women entrepreneurs’ algorithmic sense-making and their social media practices (RQ2). The remainder of this literature review will proceed on the grounds that there is much we can learn about their algorithmic sense-making and its impact on digital practices, from existing research about professional content creators. The empirical research which I carried out in the course of this project explored the extent to which claims from this body of literature apply to everyday

women entrepreneurs. With that in mind, I will now go on to discuss existing literature pertaining to the algorithmic sense-making practices of professional content creators.

Existing literature identifies a number of different ways in which professional content creators make sense of algorithms on social media and how this influences their digital practices and pursuit of online visibility. For example, Cotter (2019) found that Instagram influencers actively try to interpret the platform's architecture, including the algorithmic and design features they believe shape visibility. This sense-making process involves reading platform cues, drawing on peer knowledge, and experimenting with content strategies to align with what they perceive the platform to reward. Cotter also shows that these interpretations are not confined to the platform itself, but are interwoven with broader cultural understandings of online visibility, success, and entrepreneurial self-presentation. Cotter describes this algorithmic sense-making as essential to 'playing the visibility game'; a term she uses to describe Instagram influencers' pursuit of visibility on the platform. Cotter's concept of playing the visibility game is intended to draw attention to the "rules" of the game which, she argues, are prescribed by the platform and inscribed in algorithms. Cotter argues that influencers attempt to understand these rules and play by them in order to achieve visibility on the platform, although it should also be noted that sometimes the rules may be bent or broken depending on the goals of the user. Cotter found that much of this algorithmic sense-making occurred in Facebook groups, where influencers join forces to better understand the visibility game and construct ways to play it. In other words, they formulate tactics and strategies that would help their content be seen by more people on the platform.

Bishop (2019) also identifies Facebook groups as a key site where professional content creators, in her case female YouTube content creators, come together to make sense of algorithms and discuss visibility strategies. Bishop terms this kind of sense-making 'algorithmic gossip', defined as:

"Communally and socially informed theories and strategies pertaining to recommender algorithms, shared and implemented to engender financial

consistency and visibility on algorithmically structured social media platforms.” (p. 2589)

Bishop selects the term ‘gossip’ intentionally, as it reflects the gendered nature of this form of knowledge exchange. She argues that gossip has historically been an important form of knowledge exchange, especially amongst women and marginalised groups. By definition, gossip is informal, subjective and unverifiable. However, Bishop argues that algorithmic gossip provides a useful conceptual lens through which to view algorithmic sense-making because it has a tangible effect on the practices of content creators. Algorithmic gossip results in action by YouTube creators by informing their visibility strategies on the platform. Additionally, Bishop (2020) highlights algorithmic lore as collections of theories about algorithmic visibility, produced by ‘self-styled experts’, that promise to teach content creators how to achieve visibility on digital platforms. Algorithmic lore is underpinned by a meritocratic ethos which suggests that anyone can overcome the threat of invisibility through the right investment of time and effort (Bishop 2020). MacDonald (2021) also argues that algorithmic lore videos encourage entrepreneurship and self-discipline in creators whilst obscuring the structural inequalities which exist on social media platforms.

Inequalities exist in terms of who is able to access stories about algorithms and participate in collective algorithmic sense-making practices. In her study of algorithmic gossip, Bishop (2019) observed that YouTube content creators had to meet strict requirements in order to join specific Facebook groups where algorithmic gossip took place. This included, for example, having a minimum number of YouTube subscribers, frequency of posts and social connections to other members of a group. Therefore, new content creators who have few followers nor existing social connections, are less likely to be accepted into spaces where algorithmic gossip takes place amongst experienced creators. Cotter (2019) agrees that social privilege is often the means by which professional content creators are able to achieve success in their chosen career. She suggests that this is due to the skill and technical knowledge that is required to ‘play the visibility game’, which is more challenging for some groups to acquire due to structural inequalities. Cotter (2019) argues, therefore, that the visibility game “reinforces offline hierarchies of social

privilege with ‘winners’ being those with greater access to social, cultural, political and economic resources” (p. 909).

This body of literature suggests that experiences and outcomes of algorithmic sense-making may be different for women who are differently positioned because of structural inequalities, at different stages of their careers and/or have varying social connections and access to resources. I connect this idea to my study through my third research question. I ask what differences, if any, exist amongst different everyday women entrepreneurs in relation to algorithmic sense-making (RQ3)

Whilst the research discussed thus far focuses predominantly on the algorithmic sense-making of individual users, there is a burgeoning body of research which draws attention to the ways in which users also engage in collective algorithmic sense-making. Schellewald (2022) postulates that users share their experiences of algorithms with others and, in the process of doing so, form shared ‘stories about algorithms’. Schellewald refers specifically to ‘ordinary’ users, that is users who are not engaged in professional content production. Ordinary users, Schellewald argues, primarily consume content rather than create and, therefore, their algorithmic imaginaries are mostly focused on how they receive content recommendations from social media algorithms. Similarly, Siles et al (2020) studied ‘ordinary’ Spotify users and found that folk theories about algorithms are formed collectively as users discuss amongst themselves their experiences of algorithms and ideas about how they work. Additionally, Rader and Grey (2015) argue that users develop theories of algorithms intuitively. They may not be consciously aware that they are forming such theories, but alter their practices on a platform based on their experiences of algorithms and observations of platform visibility.

Having reviewed how some women entrepreneurs attempt to make sense of algorithms in their everyday platform practices, the next section considers how the pursuit of visibility is shaped by gendered inequalities and structural asymmetries within the platform economy.

2.4.3 The Pursuit of Visibility: Gender and Inequalities

I will now go on to review literature which provides insight into how the visibility practices of women digital entrepreneurs are influenced by their algorithmic sense-making. As this project focuses on women entrepreneurs, in this section I will draw attention, in particular, to the ways in which the pursuit of visibility is affected by gendered inequalities.

Research suggests that the hegemonic views of entrepreneurs as White and male, and the prevalence of neoliberalism and postfeminism, all of which I discussed earlier, have a significant effect on women online entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and how they pursue visibility online (Duffy and Hund 2019). Duffy and Pruchniewska (2017), who interviewed 22 women online entrepreneurs, who they describe as "independent professionals / small business owners, the majority of whom work in media, marketing, or creative fields" (p. 847), argue that women online entrepreneurs, are compelled to negotiate a 'digital double bind'. They use the term digital double bind to refer to a fine line that working women tread between being perceived as either too feminine or too masculine when presenting as an online entrepreneur. The digital double bind is not an entirely new concept nor is it unique to online work. Yet, Duffy and Pruchniewska argue that it reflects the endurance of structural inequalities by reproducing gendered expectations around appearance, emotional labour, and self-discipline. Women are expected to perform professionalism and relatability simultaneously, appearing polished and competent while also remaining approachable, authentic, and emotionally expressive. Their interviews with women in the media and creative industries demonstrate how these contradictory demands require constant self-monitoring and affective labour, reinforcing the idea that success depends not just on skill or output, but on performing the right kind of feminine subjectivity. From this perspective, the promise of "meritocratic opportunity" on digital platforms is largely superficial, as success remains constrained by persistent gendered norms around appearance, behaviour, and professionalism.

This resonates with Lewis's (2014) analysis of entrepreneurial femininities, which highlights how women feel pressure to manage their performance of femininity in

ways that align with dominant norms; being feminine enough to appear relatable, but not so much as to risk being seen as unprofessional, frivolous, or illegitimate. As an example, in a later publication, Lewis et al (2021) discuss the increasing prevalence of the 'mumpreneur' identity on digital platforms. They define a mumpreneur as a woman entrepreneur who participates simultaneously in "active motherhood and committed business ownership" (p. 69). In other words, mumpreneurs are expected to present themselves as capable of successfully managing parenting and household responsibilities while also demonstrating entrepreneurial competence. In this way, the mumpreneur fits neatly within the postfeminist idea of women being able to 'have it all'. It shows how femininity is not rejected or abandoned, but instead carefully presented in ways that are recognisable, acceptable, and commercially appealing within dominant cultural expectations. In doing so, it reveals the ongoing negotiation between visibility, legitimacy and gendered expectation in women's digital self-presentation.

Duffy and Hund (2019) argue that navigating gender norms whilst pursuing online visibility is a major challenge for women because acting, or being perceived to act, outside of gender expectations can result in "ridicule, hate, and harassment" (p. 4983). They identify an "authenticity bind" on social media, which places pressure on women entrepreneurs to present as both emotionally relatable and entrepreneurial, simultaneously. This creates significant tension for women entrepreneurs in online environments. On one hand, the neoliberal worker is expected to be "self-sacrificing, self-directed [and] entrepreneurial" (Gill 2010). In this regard, they may be expected to pursue visibility strategies which prioritise innovation, problem-solving and efficiency, values which reflect the neoliberal entrepreneurial ideal (Cotter 2019). For example, this could entail using automated services, also called 'bots', to follow and/or engage with large numbers of accounts, in the hope that some will follow back and thereby increase the users follower count, as opposed to manually following other users and engaging with them one-by-one. Cotter refers to these kinds of strategies as 'simulated methods', and metrics, such as likes, comments and shares, are viewed as social currency, prompting users to focus on deciphering how these metrics are valued by a platform's algorithm.

Another example of a simulated method is the use of Instagram ‘pods’. Pods consist of a small group of users who agree to reciprocally engage, through likes, comments and / or shares, on each other’s posts, usually within a specific timeframe. This strategy is based on a belief that the more engagement a post receives, and the quicker it receives it, the more that post will be rewarded by the algorithm with visibility (Cotter 2019). Such activity was also observed amongst Instagram influencers by O’Meara (2019), who terms this kind of practice ‘collective algorithm hacking’. However, O’Meara interprets pods not only as a visibility strategy but also as a site of organic resistance to the precarious employment conditions of a platform society. In this sense, O’Meara argues, pods are an attempt by content creators, who are mostly young women, to regain control over working conditions, the precarity of which is contributed to by the opacity of algorithmic decision making and the persistent ‘threat of invisibility’ (Bucher 2018). In this way, simulated methods could potentially help to redistribute some of the power between platforms and content creators. However, the digital double bind may mean that many women content creators are reluctant to adopt such strategies.

Through her thematic analysis of online communications between Instagram influencers about the platform’s algorithms, Cotter (2019) observed that influencers who had a greater preference for relationship building, a skill which is typically perceived as a feminine strength, tended to be critical of simulated methods such as pods. Influencers with this view would tend to pursue ‘relational methods’, which focus on producing high-quality content and engaging with followers in order to foster ‘authentic’ relationships which, they believe, will result in them being rewarded with increased visibility. Likewise, in their study of women entrepreneurs who operate in digital media/creative fields, Duffy and Pruchniewska (2017) observed that women content creators strove to balance visibility with vulnerability. Whilst visibility, viewed through the lens of postfeminism as a conduit of female empowerment, was pursued, displays of vulnerability, inextricably tied with gendered roles in home and family life, were also expected in digital environments. Thus, women face additional challenges when pursuing visibility online as they attempt to negotiate the competing demands of a neoliberal platform society and persistent gender expectations. Clearly this presents a challenge to women’s digital entrepreneurship, and further undermines the promises of meritocracy discussed earlier in this review.

In light of this tension this project asks not only how do everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms on a range of social media platforms? (RQ1) but also what is the nature of the relationship between everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and their social media practices? (RQ2) since the literature suggests that this can vary.

Furthermore, Duffy and Hund (2019) argue that content creators from marginalised communities, such as ethnic minorities and members of the LGBTQIA+ community, experience even greater scrutiny in public, online spaces. For example, in their study of women digital entrepreneurs in the UK, Martinez Dy et al (2017) found that women from marginalised ethnic groups felt pressure not only to conform to gender norms but also to hide or obscure their ethnicity. This is indicative of a triple bind, although not the term used by the authors, where the ideal woman entrepreneur is perceived not only as entrepreneurial yet feminine, but also white. Consequently, Black British and British Asian interview participants described to Martinez Dy et al (2017) the steps they took to obscure their race online. This included, for example, using an Anglicised name, posting a photo of a white person or including no photo at all. In such cases, concerns were raised that, without taking these steps, potential customers may perceive the creator as 'foreign' or untrustworthy. Yet, their interviews with White participants revealed that race was not considered consequential to business success online by entrepreneurs not from marginalised ethnic groups. In a later publication, Martinez Dy et al (2024) connect these inequalities to, what they term, 'racial capitalism'. Racial capitalism describes how capitalist systems depend on and perpetuate racial inequalities, influencing who gains access to economic opportunities and the terms under which they are made available.

Duffy and Meisner (2022) argue that platform governance is enacted unevenly, producing systematic disadvantage for marginalised creators whose content or identities deviate from dominant platform norms. Drawing on interviews with professional content creators from "historically marginalised groups and/or stigmatized content genres" (p. 1), they show how formal content moderation processes and informal mechanisms, such as shadowbans and algorithmic bias,

contribute to a perceived and lived experience of algorithmic (in)visibility. These creators frequently interpreted such mechanisms as forms of discipline and punishment, orienting their practices around self-censorship, experimentation, or circumvention. Although Duffy and Meisner's research focuses on professional content creators, their findings provide valuable insights into how platform systems reproduce inequalities in visibility and access to opportunity. Their work also reinforces the need to attend to the experiential and interpretive dimensions of platform governance, particularly among users navigating visibility from marginalised positions.

The literature reviewed in this section draws attention to some of the ways in which a range of personal characteristics might intersect and affect an individual's ability to achieve visibility online and create additional labour demands as a result. Hence, it informs my third research question, which asks what differences, if any, exist amongst different everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and social media practices?

Having considered how the pursuit of visibility is shaped by gendered expectations and structural inequalities, the following section turns to the role of platform metrics in users' ongoing efforts to make sense of algorithms.

2.4.4 Platform Metrics and Algorithmic Sense-Making

To further contextualise algorithmic sense-making and the pursuit of visibility, it is important to consider how platform metrics function as forms of feedback that are entangled with entrepreneurs' algorithm sense-making and social media practices.

As already discussed, algorithms are proprietary and largely inaccessible, meaning users cannot know with certainty how content is ranked, distributed, or withheld from view (Gillespie 2014). In this context, metrics such as reach, views, likes, and comments become a key site through which users attempt to infer how algorithms work (Bucher 2012). These metrics function as forms of platform feedback, which are not comprehensive or objective, but partial, curated, and an object of speculation. For entrepreneurs pursuing visibility on social media platforms, metrics

are often one of the only visible indicators of how their content is performing in terms of visibility (Arriagada and Ibáñez 2020; Cotter 2019). Bucher (2018) argues that, in the context of the platform economy, the dominant logic is that “more is better” and numbers are displayed pervasively to reinforce both the competitive dynamics of social media and the importance of quantification.

Importantly, platform metrics are not neutral indicators. Platforms curate, selectively highlight, and embed certain metrics within interface designs and this has the potential to shape how users perceive their own success and the value of their content. As Beer (2016) argues, metrics are “not all equal”, meaning that metrics are used selectively to structure meaning and, therefore, guide users’ attention and practices. Hence, on social media platforms some metrics are emphasised through notifications, badges, or prominent placement, while others are minimised or hidden (Grosser 2014). Similarly, Yeung (2017) suggests that platforms shape user behaviour by designing interfaces and feedback systems that subtly guide users toward specific actions and ways of engaging. This occurs through mechanisms such as dashboards, notifications, and badges.

Yet users do not all interpret data in the same way. Research on data literacy has shown that technical skill, confidence, and familiarity with analytics tools shape how individuals engage with metrics (Carmi and Yates 2020). Kennedy and Hill (2018) argue that data is often encountered affectively, particularly when users lack the “skills to decode” what the data means (p. 839). Affective responses to data are intensified by platform interfaces, which present data through emotionally charged visual elements (Kennedy and Hill 2018). In summary, this literature suggests that metrics are not merely technical artefacts, but socio-technical and affective instruments that play a critical role in algorithmic sense-making. For my study, this literature underscores the importance of attending to how women entrepreneurs interpret and respond to metrics through affective and situated forms of meaning-making.

I now turn to the conclusion of this chapter, where I draw together the key themes discussed thus far and situate them in relation to the research questions guiding this thesis.

2.5 Conclusion

This literature review has drawn attention to the gap in knowledge which exists regarding the algorithmic sense-making of everyday women entrepreneurs and the influence of algorithmic sense-making on the social media practices of these entrepreneurs. The everyday entrepreneurs who provide the focus of this study use social media to attract customers and generate revenue. However, their visibility on social media is mediated by algorithms, which are generally opaque (Bucher 2018) and complex (Kitchin 2017). This makes it challenging for any user to identify ways to improve their visibility on social media. It is of particular concern for digital entrepreneurs who require visibility in order to generate an income (Cotter 2019). To date, studies in this area have focused on social media influencers (eg. Bishop 2019) and creative or cultural workers (e.g. Scolere et al 2018). Therefore, this project addresses the question: how do everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms on a range of social media platforms (RQ1).

Existing research informs us that algorithmic sense-making has an influence on the social media practices of users (Bucher 2018). It has also highlighted additional challenges that are faced by women entrepreneurs when pursuing visibility online (Duffy and Hund 2019). Hence, this project will also question what the nature of the relationship between everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and their social media practices is (RQ2). Additionally, the literature suggests that this may differ between different women due to the perpetuation of existing structural inequalities in online spaces (Martinez Dy et al 2017). Therefore, this project also aims to investigate what differences, if any, exist amongst different everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and social media practices (RQ3).

Finally, the wider importance of these issues have been discussed in relation to the rise of the platform economy and a gender self-employment gap which has been identified as a global economic and social problem (OECD 2021). Therefore, this project will address the question: What is the relationship between platform structures and logics and the algorithmic sense-making and social media practices of everyday women-entrepreneurs? (RQ4)

Whereas in this chapter I have reviewed existing literature on the platform economy, women's entrepreneurship, digital labour, and algorithmic sense-making, Chapter Three develops the theoretical framework through which I conceptualise algorithmic sense-making and make sense of participants' narratives. Within this framework, I introduce the concept of algorithmic vibes to describe the affective, intuitive, and situated orientations through which participants make sense of social media algorithms and their relationship to everyday entrepreneurial practice. This concept is developed further in the empirical chapters, where I show how algorithmic vibes are constructed through lived experience, platform engagement, and social positioning.

Chapter Three: Algorithmic Vibes: A Theoretical Framework for Algorithmic Sense-Making

3.1 Introduction

This chapter develops a constructivist theoretical framework for understanding algorithmic sense-making, grounded in affect theory and Bourdieusian sociology. It positions algorithmic sense-making as a dynamic and ongoing process that is constructed through the entanglement of lived experience, affective orientations, platform structures, and broader societal norms, particularly those relating to entrepreneurship.

Having established the context in which the term *vibes* emerged from my data and within relevant fields of knowledge in Chapter One (Introduction), in this chapter I present my theoretical framework, which brings together the concepts that I operationalise as the building blocks of algorithmic *vibes*. I begin by discussing existing scholarship on socio-technical and algorithmic imaginaries, which demonstrates that users construct meaning about algorithms through observation, pattern recognition, and cultural narratives about what platforms might value. However, these accounts often centre discursive reflection and representational meaning-making, with less attention to the tacit, affective, and practice-based ways in which sense-making unfolds in everyday entrepreneurial life. In response to this gap, this chapter develops a conceptual framework that foregrounds affective and intuitive orientations, situated knowledge, and habituated ways of navigating algorithmic environments. Drawing these perspectives together, I introduce the concept of algorithmic *vibes* as a way of understanding how everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms through ongoing, felt engagements informed by their positioning, experience, and the socio-technical conditions of the platform economy.

I make an important distinction between knowledge, understanding, and awareness. Drawing on Oman (2021) and Taylor et al. (2024), I conceptualise understanding as a process that moves fluidly between knowing and feeling. This distinction is

essential for theorising algorithmic sense-making under conditions of opacity and uncertainty. This provides the foundation for a conceptualisation of understanding that includes intuitive, partial, and affectively informed forms of sense-making. I also utilise Haraway's (1988) theory of situated knowledge to frame algorithmic sense-making as partial, positioned, and entangled with users' socio-cultural positioning. Understanding, then, is conceptualised here as an affective, intuitive, and situated orientation to algorithmic systems.

In the next section, I turn to affect as a foundational concept for understanding how algorithmic sense-making is constructed through felt experience. I begin by outlining different theorisations of affect, including tensions between preconscious and reflective accounts. I then distinguish affect from related concepts such as emotion and feeling, drawing on Ahmed (2004) and Bericat (2016) to clarify how these categories are defined and used within my thesis. I introduce the concept of orientation (Ahmed 2006), as a way of theorising how affective and emotional responses to algorithms acquire directionality so that individuals come to lean toward particular practices within specific social and technological contexts. Algorithmic vibes are orientations to platform algorithms that are constructed through intuition, which is understood here as a mode of affective sensing based on prior experiences, feelings, and emotions that guide action in uncertain and unstable circumstances (Pedwell 2024; Berlant 2011).

I extend my theoretical framework using Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of habitus and practical mastery to theorise how affective and intuitive orientations are constructed through accumulated experience and social positioning. Habitus refers to a socially and historically produced set of dispositions that orient individuals toward particular ways of acting, feeling, and perceiving the world (Bourdieu 1990). As Jenkins (1992, p. 48) explains, habitus "disposes actors to do certain things, it provides a basis for the generation of practices" (p. 48). My use of habitus complements Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledge, emphasising that knowledge is constructed through lived, embodied experience and is entangled with broader systems of power, including gendered, racialised, and classed structures. Practical mastery (Bourdieu 1990) is enacted through habitus and refers to a context-specific, felt capacity to act effectively within a particular field. In this thesis, the field is that of digital

entrepreneurship within the platform economy. These concepts are central to my theoretical framework as they account for how certain practices come to feel more viable, familiar, or legitimate than others within the platform economy. This enables a situated account of how algorithmic vibes are constructed through the unequal conditions under which digital entrepreneurship is practised.

Having conceptualised algorithmic vibes as affective, intuitive, and situated orientations constructed through habitus and practical mastery, I turn to theories that account for the conditions in which such orientations take shape. Specifically, I draw on Anderson's (2009) concept of affective atmospheres, which has been extended by Ash (2013) and Lupton's (2017) to theorise digital atmospheres. Affective atmospheres (Anderson 2009) refer to the ambient, collective qualities of space that are felt, rather than always named or consciously understood. I also incorporate Williams' (1977) notion of structures of feeling which highlights how affective orientations are historically and culturally organised, often before becoming articulated or institutionally recognised. I incorporate Coleman's (2018) concept of infra-structures of feeling, which builds on Williams' work, to address the ambient and unsettled temporality of digital platforms. Taken together, these concepts foreground the atmospheric and structural dimensions of platform environments, helping to theorise how feelings, emotions, and affective forces are collectively organised through the entangled dynamics of user practices, technological infrastructures, and platform governance. This focus on atmospheres, structures, and infra-structures extends the conceptual grounding of algorithmic vibes, situating them not only in individual orientations but within the affective and temporal conditions of platform life.

I conclude the chapter by synthesising these theoretical perspectives into the concept of algorithmic vibes. This framework integrates affective and intuitive orientations (such as imagination, intuition, and feeling), social and cultural positioning (including situated knowledge, habitus, and practical mastery), and environmental conditions (encompassing atmospheres, structures, and infra-structures), showing how algorithmic vibes are constructed through their entanglement. In this way, algorithmic vibes provides a valuable and original framework for the empirical analysis that follows. It offers a conceptual basis for

addressing my four research questions: how everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms (RQ1); the relationship between their algorithmic sense-making and their social media practices (RQ2); how algorithmic sense-making and practice vary between differently positioned entrepreneurs (RQ3); and how platform structures and logics relate to these forms of sense-making and practice (RQ4).

3.2 Imagining Algorithms and Platform Systems

Extant literature suggests that users' understanding of platform systems, including algorithms, often begins with imagination. The concept of socio-technical imaginaries provides a useful starting point for understanding how people make sense of complex and often opaque technologies through collectively held visions of the future. Jasanoff and Kim (2016) define socio-technical imaginaries as:

“Collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology” (p. 11).

These imaginaries are enacted in ways that justify present actions and shape the direction of technological development. As Mager and Katzenbach (2021) emphasise, imaginaries help bring particular futures into being by aligning present behaviours, expectations, and governance practices with imagined possibilities. In this way, socio-technical imaginaries form part of the cultural conditions in which individual sense-making takes place, shaping the broader discursive environment in which algorithms are imagined and interpreted.

While socio-technical imaginaries foreground the collective visions and institutional discourses through which technologies are imagined at a societal level, scholars have also examined how such imaginings take shape in everyday encounters with algorithmic systems. Bucher's (2017; 2018) concept of the algorithmic imaginary draws attention to how individuals make sense of opaque algorithmic systems in their everyday lives. Bucher (2017) defines the algorithmic imaginary as: “the way in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible” (p. 31). Although users have limited access to

information about algorithms, due to platform opacity, they reflect on “what algorithms are, what they should be and how they function” based on their lived experiences of interacting with platforms (p. 30). Bucher’s emphasis on possibility is central to my thesis, as imaginaries are not only reflective but also productive, in that they enable certain practices by offering users a way to act amid uncertainty. Even when knowledge is partial or speculative, imaginaries can scaffold meaningful engagement with platforms, guiding users’ decisions about what and how to post.

Additionally, Bucher (2018) argues that the threat of invisibility plays a critical role in the construction of algorithmic imaginaries. Writing in the context of Facebook, she contends that “the problem is not the possibility of constantly being observed but the possibility of constantly disappearing” (p. 84). This formulation inverts the logic of Foucault’s (1977) Panopticon, where visibility functions as a mechanism of disciplinary power: individuals are always potentially being watched, and they therefore regulate their conduct accordingly. In contrast, Bucher suggests that digital platforms operate according to a kind of reverse panopticism, in which users are never guaranteed visibility, and must continually act to avoid becoming invisible. The perceived instability of visibility, and the absence of clear rules for maintaining it, contributes to the development of imaginaries that seek to explain, interpret, and manage the uncertainty of algorithmic systems. This dynamic is especially pronounced for users whose visibility is tied to forms of platform labour. As Duffy et al. (2021) argue, “the stakes of being rendered visible - or conversely, invisible - are intensified for platformized creative laborers given that their material gains are hitched to metric success” (p. 2). The threat of invisibility is therefore particularly acute for those who rely on platform visibility for economic or professional gain, including everyday entrepreneurs and professional content creators (Cotter 2019). Within this context, imagining how algorithms work is a condition of continued participation in platform systems structured by fluctuating visibility.

Subsequent work has extended Bucher’s notion of the algorithmic imaginary by examining how understandings of algorithms are formed not only through individual experience, but also through socially organised discourses. Bishop’s (2019) concept of algorithmic gossip, which I introduced in Chapter Two, describes the informal, peer-to-peer circulation of beliefs, assumptions, and anecdotes about platform

algorithms. These discourses play an important role in how professional content creators come to understand the algorithm as an active presence in their working lives.

Siles et al. (2020) similarly highlight the social production of algorithmic meaning, with particular attention to how people develop interpretive frameworks that span multiple platforms. Drawing from the concept of folk theories, they argue that users construct everyday explanations of algorithmic systems that reflect both what they think and what they feel about how algorithms operate, and that these understandings lead to specific ways of acting. Siles et al. (2020) argue that folk theories are closely linked to algorithmic imaginaries, and are shaped through shared discourses, values, and cross-platform learning. They emphasise that users often interpret one platform's algorithms in relation to others, drawing on what they describe as a "general imaginary or stock of beliefs from which they draw to interpret all algorithms" (p. 5). This includes not only beliefs about how algorithms work, but also data valences, referring to the expectations and values people attach to data, which emerge from their everyday discourses and practices (Fiore-Gartland and Neff 2015 cited in Siles et al. 2020). Taken together, these contributions advance the concept of the algorithmic imaginary by showing that users' interpretations are not only personal, but also discursively patterned and contextually shared across platforms.

Schellewald (2022) builds on these concepts to introduce the notion of "stories about algorithms" as an everyday discursive mechanism through which users share their experiences of algorithmic platforms. These stories function as a means of making algorithmic processes feel tangible and relatable, often by narrating moments of uncertainty, frustration, or recognition. In this sense, stories about algorithms support the formation and maintenance of algorithmic imaginaries by providing users with informal interpretive resources grounded in lived experience.

Together, these studies conceptualise algorithmic imaginaries as socially constructed and culturally sustained frameworks that help users make sense of opaque algorithmic systems. These imaginaries are grounded in interpretation and narration, and they function as interpretive resources that help users navigate

platform opacity, often in ways that are provisional, shared, and shaped by the need to remain visible. Algorithmic imaginaries are crucial for understanding how algorithms are rendered intelligible in public discourse, but they do not fully account for the intuitive or affective dimensions of sense-making that arise when users feel their way through systems without necessarily naming or explaining them. Although Bucher (2018), Bishop (2019), and Siles et al. (2020) all acknowledge that imaginaries may influence practice, their accounts do not fully attend to how sense-making and practice are mutually constituted through the efforts of users, especially everyday women entrepreneurs, to remain visible in unstable platform conditions.

I view socio-technical and algorithmic imaginaries as important foundations for the concept of algorithmic vibes. This concept of algorithmic vibes recognises that imagining, experience, and feeling are central to algorithmic sense-making, and that these processes exist in a recursive relationship with practice. Algorithmic vibes are sometimes constructed through discussion, as users share stories, theories, and gossip about algorithms. However, in the context of algorithmic vibes, knowledge about algorithms is understood as co-constructed between platforms and users rather than simply circulating within a feedback loop or entanglement. Vibes can also be constructed and have an effect on practice without being consciously named or articulated, acknowledging that forms of knowing and acting may exist beyond explicit reflection or verbalisation.

In the next section, I develop my theoretical framework by exploring how algorithmic sense-making can be theorised in relation to knowledge, understanding, and awareness, foregrounding the partial, affective, and situated character of what it means to make sense of algorithms.

3.3 Knowledge, Understanding and Awareness

It is common for the terms ‘knowledge’, ‘understanding’ and ‘awareness’ to be used interchangeably in discussions of data and algorithms. However, as Taylor et al. (2024) argue, these terms, like ‘attitudes’, ‘opinions’ and ‘perceptions’, are not synonymous and recognition of their “multiple and overlapping” meanings is

essential for scholars who aim to draw conclusions about “what people know, understand, feel, or opine about data use” (p. 35). In this section, I build on this distinction to develop a framework for understanding how knowledge is constructed under opaque platform conditions, particularly forms of knowledge that are partial, provisional, and not necessarily articulable.

To develop a conceptual language for analysing how everyday entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms, it is necessary to distinguish between knowledge, awareness and understanding. In this thesis I approach knowledge as something that is constructed through experience, understanding and social context (Goldbart and Hustler 2005; Denicolo et al 2016). Hence, I am interested in the conditions under which something comes to be understood as knowledge, and how this is expressed, felt, or acted upon in practice. This framing reflects my commitment to a constructivist epistemology, discussed in Chapter Four (Methodology) in which knowledge is made, rather than discovered, and is shaped by access, positionality, and the broader cultural logics through which platforms are encountered (Denicolo et al 2016). In the paragraphs that follow, I distinguish between understanding and awareness, before turning to feminist theories of situated knowledge that allow for a more relational and political account of algorithmic sense-making.

Oman (2021) defines understanding as both a process, through which knowledge about something is gained, and a measure of how extensive or in-depth that knowledge is. Drawing attention to the layered nature of the term, Oman argues that understanding is “both an emotional and cognitive exercise for all of us: we gain knowledge through understanding, and we become more understanding of others through experience.” (p. 354). In the context of data, Oman suggests that we might conceptualise understanding along a spectrum: “on a scale of knowing at one end, and feelings on the other” (p. 352). This indicates that there is an emotional and intuitive component to knowledge-making practices in the context of data, and likewise, sense-making practices in the context of algorithms.

Oman also highlights the importance of shared understanding, which she associates with collective meaning-making and communication. This is particularly relevant for conceptualising how knowledge of algorithmic systems may be built through

discursive exchange and interaction with others. This aligns with the literature discussed in the earlier section, specifically algorithmic gossip (Bishop 2019) and stories about algorithms (Schellewald 2022).

Drawing on the work of Yates et al (n.d), Taylor, Kennedy and Oman (2024) highlight a key difference between awareness and understanding. Whilst understanding is associated with factual knowledge and a sense of that knowledge being ‘true’, awareness refers to being conscious of something rather than having a deep or factual understanding of it. These distinctions are important when conceptualising algorithmic sense-making, which often occurs under conditions where definitive knowledge is limited or inaccessible. With this in mind, I argue that algorithmic sense-making tends to centre on awareness and understanding, rather than on stable or verifiable knowledge of how algorithms operate.

This aligns with Cotter and Reisdorf’s (2020) characterisation of algorithms as experience technologies that are “most easily understood through use” (p. 745). They suggest that users learn about algorithms in multiple ways, but mostly through extensive use of algorithmic platforms, which enables them to “accumulate observations about a technology’s pattern of behavior and to reflect on these observations over time” (p. 749). In this way, understanding and awareness are the basis of users’ algorithmic sense-making.

Importantly, however, Cotter and Reisdorf (2020) acknowledge that knowledge about algorithms is not evenly distributed, as “socioeconomic background continues to shape information and communication technology use” (p. 745). This insight draws attention to the fact that what is known and understood in relation to platform algorithms is shaped by broader social conditions. To account for this, I now turn to the concept of situated knowledge.

The concept of situated knowledge, developed by Haraway (1988), provides a critical feminist framework for understanding how knowledge is always partial and constructed through specific social, material, and historical conditions. Rejecting notions of objective or universal truth, Haraway argues that all knowledge is

produced *from somewhere*. In this sense, Haraway refers to knowledge as ‘embodied’, to suggest that knowledge is constructed through how people live, perceive, and act in the world. In the context of algorithmic systems, this means that what users come to know about platforms is shaped by their everyday conditions of work, visibility, risk, and recognition. These differences matter. Knowledge about algorithms is not universally available or equally constructed, but emerges through unequal access, differentiated experiences of platform feedback, and varying stakes in algorithmic success or failure. In my thesis, I draw on the concept of situated knowledge to frame algorithmic sense-making as contingent on the social and material conditions in which users engage with platform systems.

Like socio-technical and algorithmic imaginaries, the ideas discussed in this section form an important foundation for my development of algorithmic vibes. I share the view that knowledge is situated, partial, and contingent on the social and material contexts in which it is produced. I build on this by considering knowing and feeling as entangled in users’ efforts to make sense of algorithms, particularly in conditions where complete knowledge is unattainable due to algorithmic opacity, as discussed in Chapter Two. I apply Oman’s (2020) framing of understanding as existing “on a scale of knowing at one end and feelings on the other,” (p. 352) to algorithmic sense-making to capture how users construct meaning about algorithms without full knowledge of how they work. In the concept of algorithmic vibes, the relationship between knowledge and feeling is not a scale or hierarchy but a spectrum, where knowing, of varying degrees, and feeling coexist and interact with one another. Awareness, as discussed by Yates et al. (n.d.) and Taylor, Kennedy, and Oman (2024), also exists within this spectrum. These entanglements of knowing, feeling, and awareness are always context-dependent, differing according to individuals’ experiences, practices, and forms of participation in platform systems. The concept of algorithmic vibes draws these elements together to account for how sense-making is lived and enacted within these situated conditions.

I now turn to the affective and intuitive dimensions of algorithmic sense-making, focusing on how orientations are constructed through embodied dispositions, felt responses, and everyday practices.

3.4 Constructing Orientation: Affect, Intuition, and Practice

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, and in Chapter Two (Literature Review), accounts of algorithmic sense-making often focus on what users say they know, believe, or understand about platforms. However, how algorithms make users feel is also important because, as Bucher (2017) points out, users do not experience algorithms simply as “abstract computational processes” (p. 40) but as socio-technical constructs that produce “moods, affects and sensations” (p. 32).

Drawing on Gregg and Seigworth (2010), Bucher (2017) understands affect as “mood and intensity corresponding to ‘forces of encounter’” (p. 31). In this framing, affect refers to the intensities that arise through encounters, such as what is felt in the body, sensed in the atmosphere, or perceived as a shift in energy or tone during an interaction (Gregg and Seigworth 2010). For Bucher (2017; 2018), affect helps explain why users do not experience algorithms as neutral or purely technical systems. Instead, algorithmic systems produce particular moods or affective orientations, such as anxiety, vigilance, or hope, which contribute to how users imagine and make sense of what algorithms are doing.

Affect is a concept with multiple, and at times conflicting, interpretations. In foundational affect theory, such as that outlined by Gregg and Seigworth (2010), affect is described as a visceral force that operates “beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing” (p. 1). From this perspective, affect is not easily captured through language or reflection, but instead registers as intensity, inclination, or force; a tendency that moves bodies before thought fully takes shape. However, other scholars have challenged the idea that affect is necessarily pre-conscious. Richard and Rudnyckij (2009), for example, describe affect as “inherently reflective and intersubjective” (p. 55), drawing attention to how affective responses are not only felt, but thought about, talked through, and socially negotiated. In this thesis, I understand affect as encompassing both pre-conscious intensities and reflective practices. That is, affect may register initially as a feeling or force that is not immediately articulated, but it can also become a site of reflection, narration and sense-making, particularly in environments where entrepreneurs are trying to make sense of opaque systems such as algorithms.

Although interrelated concepts, it is important to distinguish affect from ‘emotion’. As Bericat (2016) observes, arriving at a precise definition of emotion is difficult, given the diversity of perspectives that surround it. Nonetheless, Bericat proposes that “emotions constitute the bodily manifestation of the importance that an event in the natural or social world has for a subject” (p. 492). In this view, emotion is a form of bodily consciousness that signals significance and regulates the subject’s relationship with the world. In contrast, affect is less easily named or located. In this thesis, I treat affect and emotion as entangled but analytically distinct. While emotion describes the named and expressed feeling, affect refers to the social and material force that draws people toward particular responses, attachments, or strategies.

It is important to distinguish feelings from emotions, particularly in research that seeks to understand how people relate to algorithmic systems. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, they can be analytically separated. Emotions can be understood as culturally recognisable and socially expressed responses, such as anger, joy, or anxiety, whereas feelings refer to the more internal, subjective, and sometimes unarticulated experience of those emotions (Bericat 2016). In my thesis, I use emotion to refer to the named and socially recognisable expressions of affective experience, and feeling to capture the more personal, embodied, and sometimes unarticulated experience of those emotions.

This distinction is particularly useful when examining how participants engage with algorithmic signals such as metrics, platform interfaces, and changes in visibility. Drawing on empirical research, Kennedy and Hill (2018) argue that emotional responses are not incidental to data engagement, but fundamental to how people relate to metrics, patterns, and visualisations. They introduce the concept of the feeling of numbers to describe how data are lived as affective forces. In their view, it is not only “numbers” that matter, but also how numbers feel. Although their focus is on statistical data and visualisation, their argument is equally relevant to the experience of algorithmic platforms, where performance metrics act as both informational cues and affective triggers that shape how users interpret their platform visibility.

Extant research has highlighted how affect, feeling and emotion often intersect in users' engagements with algorithmic systems. For example, Bishop (2018) documents how entrepreneurial beauty vloggers on YouTube described experiencing anxiety and panic in response to declining visibility. These are emotional responses rooted in the uncertainty of platform algorithms. These emotions were accompanied by shared feelings of frustration and confusion, which vloggers discussed in peer networks and online communities (Bishop 2019). In these exchanges, personal feelings became socially articulated, enabling participants to collectively interpret their experiences. What begins as a felt response thus becomes part of a broader affective process, in which intensities circulate, resonate, and inform shared understandings of algorithmic logics. These affective dynamics contributed to evolving orientations and adaptations in vloggers' platform practices.

Drawing on Ahmed (2006), I use the concept of orientation to refer to the way individuals inhabit and move through spaces by turning toward what feels familiar, promising, or viable. Ahmed argues that orientations shape our encounters with objects, spaces, and power relations, directing attention and action in ways that are informed by history, habit, and social positioning. In my thesis, I use orientation as a way of describing how users lean into or withdraw from certain practices or spaces based on what feels viable, rewarding, or risky in a given platform context. These orientations are continually re-formed through affective responses to visibility, engagement, and perceived success or failure. In this way, orientation captures the recursive relationship between sense-making and practice. Affect actively directs entrepreneurs' movements within platform systems. This aligns with Seaver's (2017) view of algorithms as dynamic and unstable objects that are culturally enacted through the everyday practices of users.

In this thesis, I argue that orientations are constructed through intuition; a form of affective sensing that draws on prior experiences, feelings, and emotional responses to guide action in the absence of certainty. Building on Berlant (2011), I understand intuition as a way of navigating unstable or contradictory conditions, particularly when outcomes are uncertain or information is incomplete. Intuition is entangled with affective and experiential forms of knowing. Pedwell (2024) describes it as the interplay of "the conscious and the nonconscious [...] the cognitive and the affective"

(p. 191), highlighting how it surpasses purely rational analysis. As I explained earlier in this section, I understand affect as encompassing both pre-conscious intensities and reflective practices. This resonates with Pedwell's emphasis on the interplay of conscious and nonconscious. Thus, I understand intuition as operating across registers, enabling users to act in ways that feel viable or promising, even in the absence of verifiable knowledge.

To conceptualise how intuitive forms of knowing are shaped by an individual's social positioning, I draw on Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus. Habitus refers to an internalised set of dispositions through which individuals learn, through their social positioning, how to act and respond within particular fields (Skeggs 2004). In the context of my thesis, the field in question is digital entrepreneurship within the platform economy; a field characterised by rapidly changing rules, opaque systems, and the need to anticipate platform logics in order to be visible. Habitus, along with Bourdieu's concept of practical mastery, which I go on to explain, is particularly relevant to my study of everyday entrepreneurship because Bourdieu is centrally concerned with the logic of practice; that is, with how people act and make decisions in the context of their everyday lives (Jenkins 1992).

As Skeggs (2004) explains, "Bourdieu proposes the habitus, an internal organizing mechanism which learns, as a result of social positioning, how to play the game; dispositions arise from the fields to which one has access, knowledge and experience" (p. 145). Here habitus is understood as a set of embodied, often pre-reflexive, dispositions that shape how individuals perceive, evaluate, and act in the world (Bourdieu 1990). As Jenkins (1992) notes, Bourdieu does not provide a precise account of what these dispositions are. He suggests instead that they likely include "a spectrum of cognitive and affective factors: thinking and feeling" [emphasis in the original] (p. 47). This interpretation underpins my use of habitus in this thesis, aligning with my argument that knowledge about algorithms encompasses intuitive thought and felt, affective responses.

Bourdieu (1990) argues that the dispositions that make up one's habitus are durable, meaning they tend to persist over time and continue to inform perception and action as individuals encounter new situations or move through different stages of life. He

also describes habitus as transposable, referring to their capacity to be applied across a range of contexts. This enables individuals to respond to unfamiliar situations in ways that feel coherent with their histories and social positioning.

Habitus is also described by Bourdieu (1990) as “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (p. 72). This formulation highlights that habitus is a product of history, formed through exposure to specific social conditions that are structured by power relations. Subsequent scholars have extended the concept to show how habitus is formed through intersecting classed, gendered, and racialised experiences, including those relating to education, family life, work, and culture (see for example: McNay 1999; Seay 2004). Reay (2004) argues that habitus is “primarily a method for analysing the dominance of dominant groups in society and the domination of subordinate groups” (p. 437). However, she also observes that Bourdieu’s writings often subsume key structuring factors such as gender, race, disability, and sexuality under the broader category of social class. Nevertheless, she concludes that it is possible to extend Bourdieu’s concept to account for how habitus is shaped by multiple and intersecting structural factors. This emphasis on the historical and social formation of habitus resonates with Haraway’s (1988) concept of situated knowledge, discussed earlier, which similarly foregrounds how all ways of knowing are produced from particular embodied positions and shaped by intersecting structures of power.

Having established habitus as a historically produced set of dispositions shaped by an individual’s past experiences and position in society, I now turn to Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of practical mastery to explore how habitus is enacted through intuitive, responsive forms of action within a given field. As introduced earlier, in my thesis the field in question is that of digital entrepreneurship within the platform economy. As Jenkins (1992) articulates, practice arises not from habitus alone, but from the encounter between habitus and the conditions of a given field. He explains that:

“Practices are produced in and by the encounter between the habitus and its dispositions, on the one hand, and the constraints, demands and

opportunities of the social field or market to which the habitus is appropriate or within which the actor is moving, on the other” (p. 48).

Through the ongoing and recursive interaction between habitus and field, individuals develop what Bourdieu (1990) calls practical mastery, a term he uses to refer to a form of context-specific know-how that is forged through repeated engagement within a particular field. Practical mastery involves developing a “feel for the game”; that is, a capacity to act effectively in complex environments without relying on explicit reasoning or codified knowledge. This feel is acquired through ongoing engagement with the structures and affordances of a field. As Jenkins (1992) summarises in his reading of Bourdieu:

“The power of habitus derives from the thoughtlessness of habit and habituation, rather than consciously learned rules and principles. Socially competent performances are produced as a matter of routine, without explicit reference to a body of codified knowledge, and without the actors necessarily ‘knowing what they are doing’ (in the sense of being able to adequately explain what they are doing.) (p. 46)

Contemporary scholars have drawn on Bourdieu’s concept of practical mastery to illuminate how users navigate digital environments, particularly in relation to visibility and platform dynamics. As Cotter (2019) observes, “the visibility game inherits many features of Bourdieu’s ideas, namely the process of acclimation to rules and strategies within a field, the corresponding goal of accumulating various forms of capital, and an understanding of behavior as resulting from an interrelationship between structure, habitus, and strategy” (p. 900). Cotter’s writing highlights how entrepreneurs, specifically social media influencers, engage with the field of digital entrepreneurship on social media in ways that reflect their position, aspirations, and accumulated knowledge. Building on this, I understand practical mastery as a way of making sense of how intuitive orientations are constructed through ongoing engagement with the field of digital entrepreneurship. These orientations are informed by the entanglement between entrepreneurs’ habitus, affective responses, and the structuring conditions of platform environments, as individuals engage in practices that feel likely to sustain visibility within shifting algorithmic dynamics.

The ideas discussed in this section further add to the conceptual foundation for algorithmic vibes. I agree with Bucher's (2017) argument that algorithmic systems produce moods, affects, and sensations. However, algorithmic vibes conceptualises users as active participants in interpreting and responding to these forces, even when such responses are felt rather than articulated. This view shifts attention from affect as something generated by platforms to affect as something that emerges through users' embodied and interpretive engagements with those systems. I understand affect as encompassing both pre-reflective and reflective dimensions, recognising that felt responses to algorithms may move fluidly between the two at different moments. I draw on Pedwell's (2017) conceptualisation of intuition as the interplay of "the conscious and the nonconscious [...] the cognitive and the affective" (p. 191) to develop this view, as it highlights how affective responses to algorithms are not separate from understanding but part of the interpretive processes through which meaning is constructed. In the concept of algorithmic vibes, affect and intuition are central to understanding how users position themselves in relation to algorithmic systems and how they interpret their influence on everyday practices of visibility.

Building on this, I draw on Ahmed's (2006) concept of orientation as another core component of algorithmic vibes, using it to understand how affective and intuitive responses are translated into ways of positioning the self in relation to algorithms and others within platform spaces. Algorithmic vibes, as orientations, are continually negotiated and entangled with processes of knowing and understanding that are situated and affectively charged. How individuals respond to the way algorithms make them feel plays a crucial role in how they construct meaning about these systems. Users possess the agency to reflect on their feelings, choose what to attend to, and decide how to respond. This makes algorithmic vibes inherently situated, as each person's orientation is shaped by their social position, lived experience, and free will.

To further conceptualise how these orientations become embodied through practice, I draw on Bourdieu's (1990) work on habitus and practical mastery. Habitus helps to explain how users' orientations towards algorithms are informed by their social and

professional histories, shaping what feels possible, desirable, or familiar within digital spaces. Practical mastery, in turn, illuminates how users develop embodied know-how through repeated engagement with platform systems, which Bourdieu terms a “feel for the game.” These ideas contribute to algorithmic vibes by grounding orientations in the social and embodied conditions through which they are formed. Yet algorithmic vibes extends beyond practical mastery by incorporating the affective, intuitive, and atmospheric dimensions of such attunement - I go on to discuss atmospheres in the proceeding section. Whereas Bourdieu focuses on socially learned dispositions that guide practice, algorithmic vibes also attends to how these dispositions are shaped by feelings, moods, and anticipations generated through interaction with opaque and dynamic algorithmic environments. In doing so, algorithmic vibes connects habitus and practical mastery with affective and atmospheric modes of orientation, highlighting how users’ embodied understanding is both learned and felt.

3.5 The Affective Atmospheres, Structures and Infra-structures of Platform Environments

To fully account for how algorithmic sense-making happens in practice, it is necessary to consider not only entrepreneurs’ affective, intuitive, and practice-based orientations, but also the environments in which sense-making takes place. In this section, I turn to the concept of atmosphere to explore how platforms are felt and experienced as ambient conditions. I explain how the concept of atmosphere draws attention to the diffuse feelings, intensities, and anticipatory logics that circulate throughout platform spaces. The concept enables a shift in analytical scale, from how individuals orient themselves in relation to algorithms to how they attune to broader moods. This shift is not a departure from the theoretical concerns outlined so far, but a necessary extension of them as it highlights how affect gathers around entrepreneurs, shaping the field of possible action and reinforcing shared expectations about platform participation.

Originally developed by geographers, the concept of atmosphere primarily refers to the affective qualities of space. Kirsh (2023) explains that “architects use atmosphere to refer to a holistic, emergent property of space that partly determines

the mood of inhabitants”. Although the concept is grounded in the analysis of physical environments, it has since been taken up by scholars of affect to understand how emotions, feelings, and affective intensities come to infuse everyday spaces, including digital ones (Ash 2013; Lupton 2017).

Because affect is a central concern of this thesis, I draw specifically on Anderson’s (2009) formulation of affective atmospheres. Anderson defines affective atmospheres as:

“Spatially discharged affective qualities that are autonomous from the bodies that they emerge from, enable and perish with. As such, to attend to affective atmospheres is to learn to be affected by the ambiguities of affect/emotion, by that which is determinate and indeterminate, present and absent, singular and vague.” p. 80)

This definition foregrounds the transitory, collective, and ambiguous nature of affective atmospheres. They emerge in the spaces between bodies and environments, taking shape through everyday encounters. The ambiguity of affective atmospheres arises from the way they blend affect and emotion, personal and impersonal experience, clarity and vagueness.

In my thesis, I use the concept to analyse how algorithmically-governed platform environments feel, as well as what entrepreneurs think or understand about them. Incorporating affective atmospheres into my theoretical framework allows me to consider how affect, emotions and feelings circulate through the platform environment, subtly shaping what actions feel viable, necessary, or possible. This is especially relevant to my fourth research question, which asks: What is the relationship between platform structures and logics and the algorithmic sense-making and social media practices of everyday women entrepreneurs?

Building on Anderson’s work, Lupton (2017) takes the concept of affective atmospheres into the digital realm, showing how platform environments and other digital interfaces generate affect through the entangled relations between users, technologies, and broader systems of governance. Lupton describes digital

atmospheres as affective assemblages that are not only technological, but that arise through the entangled interactions between humans, nonhumans, and affective forces. Drawing on Anderson's work, she argues that affective atmospheres have "profound effects on the ways in which people think and feel about and sense the spaces they inhabit and through which they move and the other actors in those spaces" (p. 1). In this formulation, digital affective atmospheres are shaped through the ongoing dynamics of human-technology interaction.

Anderson's conceptualisation of affective atmospheres and Lupton's extension into the digital realm contribute to my theoretical framework by sustaining a focus on affect, emotion and feeling, whilst also attending to how platforms feel to users and the co-construction of those feelings through the entanglement of human practices, technological infrastructures, and affective forces. These dynamics form the atmospheric conditions within which everyday women entrepreneurs attempt to make sense of algorithms.

Ash (2013a; 2013b) offers a distinct perspective on atmosphere by highlighting how technological objects themselves generate spatio-temporal conditions that structure affective experience. Unlike Anderson (2009), who emphasises the relational emergence of atmospheres between bodies and environments, and Lupton (2017), who focuses on the affective entanglements between users and digital platforms, Ash adopts a non-human-centred and materialist approach. He argues that technical systems such as smartphones and video games actively participate in the production of atmosphere. This perspective extends existing accounts by highlighting how technical systems, including software and hardware, have the capacity to generate what he calls "spatio-temporal atmospheres" (p. 20). In this way, Ash contributes to a broader understanding of digital atmospheres by showing how technological infrastructures themselves condition the affective dynamics of digital environments.

The concept of atmosphere foregrounds the spatial-relational dynamics of affect. However, other theorists focus more explicitly on the temporal and structural conditions that organise affective experience. Williams' (1977) concept of 'structures of feeling' provides a way to account for the affective and temporal dimensions of

lived experience, particularly those that are not yet codified within dominant cultural narratives. Williams uses this term to describe the shared feelings and emotional undercurrents that emerge within specific historical and social conditions at a certain time, often before they become fully articulated or institutionally recognised. A key aspect of this process is pre-emergent feelings which are not yet fully formed, named or acknowledged but are felt and grounded in people's lived experiences.

Structures of feeling are especially valuable for theorising affective orientations that do not take the form of fully articulated knowledge. The concept draws attention to how people become attuned to dominant systems or cultural shifts through everyday, affective experience, even when they cannot name or explain what they are sensing. This offers a useful framework for thinking about how orientations to algorithmic systems might be formed through feelings of resonance, dissonance, or unease that register beneath the level of conscious awareness. Pedwell (2024) builds on Williams' account to argue that intuition itself can be understood as a structure of feeling, particularly under conditions of uncertainty where affective orientations offer a way of navigating the present in the absence of stable knowledge.

However, whereas Williams conceptualised structures of feeling as pre-emergent and ultimately stabilising into dominant social formations, algorithmically-driven platforms are characterised by continual change and instability (Coleman 2018). For this reason, I draw on Coleman's (2018) notion of infra-structures of feeling, which retains Williams' emphasis on collective and affective experience, but attends more directly to the ongoing and unsettled temporality of digital life. Coleman uses the term infra-structures to highlight the subtle, everyday mechanisms through which digital media sustain a continuous affective present. She argues that digital platforms generate a "present temporality". This is a temporal condition that is immediate but also open-ended, ambient, and recursive. These infra-structures of feeling remain in flux, making them especially useful for understanding the affective conditions under which algorithmic sense-making unfolds.

Together, the concepts of affective digital atmospheres and infra-structures of feeling contribute to an affect-focused theoretical framework that accounts for how algorithmic sense-making takes place through the interactions between users,

technologies, and broader affective and structural conditions. These ideas extend the concept of algorithmic vibes beyond individual orientations to encompass the ambient and collective dynamics through sense-making is shaped on platforms. The concepts introduced in this section of the chapter build on and extend one another, offering complementary ways of attending to the ambient conditions under which sense-making unfolds. In particular, incorporating Lupton's (2021) conceptualisation of digital atmospheres emphasises how platforms and users are entangled and co-construct meaning, while Coleman's (2022) notion of infra-structures of feeling draws attention to the unsettled temporality and rhythm of digital work that influence how algorithmic vibes are formed and sustained. This extends the analytical focus from individual practices to the spatial, temporal, and infrastructural dynamics that make certain responses feel viable or intuitive in platform environments. In this way, algorithmic vibes can be understood not only as individually felt orientations but also as atmospherically conditioned, emerging through the affective atmospheres and shared moods of platform life.

3.6 Algorithmic Vibes: Intuitive and Affective, Speculative and Anticipatory, and Situated Orientations

The framework developed in this chapter brings together four intersecting strands of theory: the imaginative dimensions of algorithmic systems; the affective and situated character of knowledge and understanding; the construction of orientation through intuition, affect and practice; and the ambient, structural, and temporal conditions of algorithmically-governed environments, to form the theoretical basis for the concept of algorithmic vibes. Thus, algorithmic vibes provides a conceptual tool for understanding how sense-making leads to certain orientations towards algorithms that are affectively charged and practically enacted, as well as situated within broader systems of power, platform governance, and socio-technical organisation.

In Chapters Five - Seven, based on my data analysis, I define algorithmic vibes as affective and intuitive, speculative and anticipatory, and situated orientations to platform algorithms. These orientations are constructed through the entangled dynamics of feeling and knowing, of practical mastery and affective attunement, and are grounded in the social, cultural, and economic positioning of users and shaped

by their lived experiences. Algorithmic vibes are conditioned by the atmospheric, structural, and infra-structural dimensions of algorithmically governed environments. In this way, algorithmic vibes provides a conceptual framework for understanding how sense-making and practice are constructed in relation to platform conditions; through an intuitive “feel for the game” that is informed by prior experience, affective atmospheres, and the everyday constraints of digital labour.

Foregrounding intuition, habitus, and atmosphere, the concept of algorithmic vibes provides a way of conceptualising the recursive interplay between affect, action, and structural constraint. It situates algorithmic sense-making in how everyday women entrepreneurs intuitively navigate and respond to the shifting field of digital entrepreneurship. Existing work on digital entrepreneurship and algorithmic sense-making has focused primarily on visibility, labour, and technical opacity. By contrast, the concept of algorithmic vibes accounts for the affective, intuitive, and uneven conditions under which algorithmic sense-making and entrepreneurial practice unfolds, and highlights how meaning, feeling, and action are co-constructed in relation to algorithmic systems.

The concept of algorithmic vibes contributes to an emerging body of research that draws on the contemporary vernacular of ‘vibes’ to make sense of affective and atmospheric dimensions of digital life. As Brown et al. (2024) explain, a “vibe” refers to “a combination of symbolic, aesthetic, and contextual elements; literal atmospheric factors such as weather, humidity, and time of day; as well as intuitions and hard-to-articulate “feelings” about the overall mood of something” (p. 2). Outside of academic publications, James’ (2021) writing on vibes also adds a useful perspective, as they say:

“Vibes (or sometimes “vibez”) are everywhere now. Colloquially, “vibez” is used to express an intention, a situation/one’s geographic and sociological position, an ambience, a state of mind, one’s material surroundings, and other sorts of contexts that orient present and future possibilities.”
(para 1-2).

Existing work in this area has examined how users articulate and describe platform moods (Kender 2022), how platforms themselves mediate and circulate ambient affect (Lupinacci 2024), and how advertising is experienced as a vibed sequence of algorithmically tuned stimuli (Brown et al. 2024). While this body of work signals a growing interest in how affect is sensed and organised within digital life, algorithmic vibes, as developed in this thesis, offers an original contribution by theorising vibes as orientations to algorithmic systems. It brings a sociological account of habitus, orientation, affect, and practice into conversation with contemporary understandings of digital platforms, advancing a framework that accounts for the entanglement of awareness, feeling, and structure.

In the following chapter, I outline the methodological approach that underpins this study, detailing how my constructivist epistemology, feminist research principles, and qualitative methods support an inquiry into the algorithmic sense-making and social media practices of everyday women entrepreneurs.

Chapter Four - Methodology

4.1 Introduction

Having established the conceptual foundations of my research in the previous chapters, first through a review of relevant literature, and then by developing a theoretical framework centred on algorithmic sense-making, this chapter outlines the methodological approach taken to investigate the algorithmic sense-making of everyday women entrepreneurs. It moves from questions of literature and theory to the practical, epistemological, and ethical considerations involved in designing and conducting the research.

In this chapter I provide a detailed explanation of the qualitative methodology adopted in this study. I begin by outlining the aims and objectives of the project, which align with the knowledge gap identified and delineated in Chapter Two (Literature Review). I then go on to discuss the rationale for using qualitative methodology, which is grounded in interpretivist epistemology and feminist research approaches. I then reflect on my positionality in this study, particularly in terms of 'the space between' insider and outsider (Dwyer and Buckle 2009), and the reflexive process I committed to throughout all stages of conducting and writing about this research. Subsequently, I provide the rationale for collecting data via qualitative methods; semi-structured interviews, asynchronous online communication with participants and online participant observation, with a thorough account of how these methods were employed and the steps that were taken to ensure that the research was conducted in line with principles of ethical research. Finally I discuss how thematic analysis was used to organise and interpret the collected data.

4.2 Research Aims and Objectives

My research project investigates how everyday women entrepreneurs attempt to make sense of social media algorithms and the relationship between algorithmic sense-making and their social media practices, including an exploration of differences between different everyday women entrepreneurs. The study also questions the relationship between platform structures and logics and the algorithmic

sense-making and social media practices of everyday women-entrepreneurs, in the context of a platform economy and global gender self-employment gap that disproportionately affects women.

I address the following research questions:

1. How do everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms on a range of social media platforms?
2. What is the nature of the relationship between everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and their social media practices?
3. What differences, if any, exist amongst different everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and social media practices?
4. What is the relationship between platform structures and logics and the algorithmic sense-making and social media practices of everyday women entrepreneurs?

As I have noted in previous chapter, there is a burgeoning body of literature that relates to how social media users form algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher 2017), intuitive folk theories (Rader and Grey 2015; Siles et al 2020) and stories (Schellewald 2022) about how algorithms work. Research has uncovered some of the ways that entrepreneurial users share their experiences of algorithms and engage in algorithmic gossip (Bishop 2019) and how they attempt to understand the 'rules' of social media platforms in order to formulate strategies for playing 'the visibility game' (Cotter 2019). However, research into algorithmic sense-making and women's online entrepreneurship has mostly focused on social media influencers and professional content creators, overlooking self-employed women, especially everyday women entrepreneurs, despite the consequences algorithmic platforms have for their ability to sustain a living.

The everyday women entrepreneurs who participated in this study included women who operate their businesses mostly or entirely online such as online consultants,

coaches and e-commerce retailers. It also included women who deliver services offline but use social media to generate work, such as a dance teacher, dog groomer and therapists. I introduce my participants later in this chapter (Section 4.5.1), and in more detail in the subsequent empirical chapters. Some of the businesses that participants' operate may appear somewhat unusual, and I provide descriptions to explain each participant's business. Yet, it is not the nature of the business that constitutes the 'everyday-ness' of participants' entrepreneurship. Instead, 'everyday entrepreneurship' is used to refer to entrepreneurship that is embedded in the rhythms, responsibilities, and practicalities of these women's everyday lives. It also sets them apart from more visible forms of online entrepreneurship, such as professional content creators.

The need to address the research gap by considering everyday women entrepreneurs is particularly pressing given the global gender self-employment gap (OECD 2023), the disproportionate effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on self-employed women (OECD 2021; OECD 2023) and the persistence of structural inequalities on online platforms (Duffy and Hund 2019). This study aims to address this gap by investigating how everyday women entrepreneurs in the UK make sense of algorithms, how this affects their social media practices and the differences that may exist between different women.

4.3 Methodological Approach

4.3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Position

This is a qualitative study, underpinned by both an interpretivist and constructivist epistemology. From an interpretivist perspective, the research is concerned with understanding the meanings that everyday women entrepreneurs assign to social media algorithms and how these meanings shape their practices. This aligns with the view that knowledge is not objective or fixed but emerges from lived experience and social and cultural contexts (Goldbart and Hustler 2005). At the same time, the study adopts a constructivist stance, which holds that knowledge is not passively received but actively constructed by individuals through their interactions with the

world. Construction of meaning is, therefore, shaped by prior experiences, social positioning, and cultural understandings (Denicolo et al 2016). This resonates with Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus, which refers to the deeply embedded dispositions formed through an individual's social and cultural background, which shape their everyday practices. Throughout this thesis, I argue that habitus plays an important role in algorithmic sense-making practices.

These epistemological positions are complementary since interpretivism focuses on uncovering meaning and constructivism provides insight into how meanings are formed through processes of sense-making that are both habituated and dynamic. Together, they underpin a research approach that seeks to uncover how everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of social media algorithms within the broader structures of the platform economy.

Furthermore, I employ ethnomethodology which refers to a research approach that draws on ethnographic methods without necessarily conforming to the strict criteria of ethnography. It is used broadly to describe studies that prioritise gathering data about people's experiences through techniques like interviews and unstructured observation, and that emphasise description and narrative in their presentation of findings (Somekh and Lewin 2005). I adopt Golbart and Hustler's (2005) view of individuals as "meaning-makers" and seek to understand how individuals make sense of the worlds they "inhabit, construct and utilise" (p. 16). Therefore, semi-structured interviews, ongoing asynchronous online communication with participants and online participant observation were used to collect qualitative data to address the research questions outlined above.

This approach is particularly well-suited to the study of algorithms, which, following Seaver (2017), I approach ethnographically, not as static objects, but as cultural phenomena shaped by and through everyday practices. Thus, algorithms are understood "as culture" rather than objects "*in* culture" (p. 5). Culture is a complex and highly contested term (Eagleton 2016), but here I will follow Seaver's understanding of culture "as the manifold consequences of a variety of human practices" (p. 4), as opposed to a body of artistic work or a collection of values, beliefs and customs (Eagleton 2016). Approaching algorithms as culture entails

seeing them not as stable or singular but as multiple, unstable objects that are “enacted through the varied practices that people use to engage with them” (p. 1). This also aligns with an understanding of algorithms as socio-technical constructs shaped and reshaped by human actors (Gillespie 2014), which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2 (Literature Review).

The research design also heeds Schellewald’s (2022) call for methodological duality in order to study both what users say and what they do in relation to algorithms. Methodological duality refers to researchers attending to both participants’ narratives about algorithms and their observable platform practices in order to better comprehend their lived experience of algorithms. To respond to this call, I considered two approaches. One was to observe collective algorithmic sense-making in online spaces, which Bishop (2019) and Cotter (2019) had found to be a significant phenomenon that social media influencers engaged in, particularly in Facebook Groups. I pursued this approach, as detailed in Section 6 of this Chapter, but was only able to collect limited data this way due to access issues, also discussed below. The second approach would have been to observe how everyday women entrepreneurs were using social media. However, I felt that this wouldn’t enable me to answer my research questions as observing their activity in isolation would not reveal how they were making sense of algorithms nor the relationship this had with their practices. Instead, I focused on participants as “meaning-makers” and utilised semi-structured interviews and ongoing asynchronous communications so that they could describe their social media practices, both in terms of what they do and why they do it.

4.3.2 Feminist Research Approach

Much extant scholarship on entrepreneurship, as Jones et al (2025) observe, either overlooks feminist perspectives altogether or incorporates them in implicit rather than explicitly theorised or methodologically grounded ways. By contrast, my research adopts an explicitly feminist methodology that foregrounds the epistemic value of women’s lived experiences and the affective, situated and relational dimensions of knowledge production. My research is grounded in a feminist approach that centres relationality (Harding 1987), situated knowledge (Haraway 1988), and ethical

responsibility throughout the research process. Relationality refers to the understanding that knowledge is produced not in isolation but through dynamic, socially situated relationships between researcher and participant, and between individuals and the broader systems and structures they navigate (Harding 1987). Informed by an interpretivist and constructivist epistemology, I understand knowledge as partial, contextual, and co-produced within research encounters (Goldbart and Hustler 2005; Denicolo et al 2016). Drawing on Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledge, I reject the notion of a detached, objective researcher and instead foreground my own position and reflexivity as integral to the meaning-making process (England 1994; Pillow 2003). This relational perspective informs my reflexive practice throughout the project, as discussed in detail in Section 4.4.

My research is guided by the three core characteristics of feminist research proposed by Harding (1987). First, the research questions are grounded in women's lived experiences, namely the struggles that everyday women entrepreneurs face in navigating platform visibility, algorithmic uncertainty and gendered forms of digital labour. Second, this research is designed for women, in the sense that it aims to produce knowledge that is meaningful, usable and politically relevant to those whose labour is often rendered invisible by platform structures and logics. I centre the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs and the challenges they face in achieving visibility online. I am committed to sharing my findings with women entrepreneurs through accessible formats, including networking events, podcast interviews, and collaborations with organisations that support women in business. Finally, I position myself on the same critical plane as my participants, meaning that I subject my own social positioning, values, and assumptions to the same level of attentive reflection as I do my participants'. I recognise that knowledge is not discovered but co-produced through the dynamics of the research encounter. I practice reflexivity throughout my research by attending to how my own experiences, emotions, and positionality shaped the interviews and my interpretations of them. For example, in Section 4.4 I reflect on moments of resonance and dissonance in the interview setting and discuss how these shaped the co-construction of meaning. In doing so, I challenge objectivist assumptions of neutrality and affirm the epistemic value of

participants' situated knowledge, including their awareness, uncertainties, and affective orientations.

A core tenet of my feminist approach is the rejection of epistemic hierarchies that privilege technical or institutional forms of expertise over experiential, intuitive or affective forms of knowing (Alcoff and Potter 1993; Code 1991; Harding 1987). This is especially relevant in this study which is concerned with how everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithmic systems that are opaque. I value the ways participants articulate awareness, understanding and felt sense-making as legitimate and analytically meaningful, rather than treating algorithmic knowledge as something participants either possess or lack. This stance is informed by long-standing feminist critiques of dominant knowledge systems, including Black feminist scholarship which has shown how such systems have historically marginalised the situated knowledge of women, particularly those racialised as Black (Collins 1990). By foregrounding participants' everyday knowledge and affective orientations, I resist hierarchies that valorise abstract or technical expertise over socially and materially grounded understandings. This epistemological stance is accompanied by a critical awareness of how structural inequalities, relating to platform governance, gendered norms, and digital precarity, shape the lives and practices of women entrepreneurs. I seek to represent complexity, attend to difference, and honour the multiplicity of situated experiences that emerge across the research.

These feminist principles informed my approach to recruitment and informed consent (Section 7.1), the way interviews were conducted (Section 5.2), data analysis and presentation (Section 8) and my reflexive practice throughout the research process (Section 4). I will go on to explain my methodology in more detail, but first I will explain my positionality in the project.

4.4 Reflective Practice

As discussed in the previous section, this research is grounded in a feminist ethics of relationality and reflexivity. I have approached this research as an affective and relational process, through which myself and my participants have co-constructed meaning in ways shaped by mutual perceptions and positionalities.

My experience as a woman entrepreneur and a social media marketing professional, working with self-employed women in particular for several years, provided the original motivation for this project. My identity as a feminist also informed my research design and influenced how I carry out data collection, analyse data and present my findings. However, I am also mindful of my position and the ways in which this shapes my perspective, privileges, and interactions with participants. I am a white, 36 year old, queer, cis-woman. I come from a working class background, although both of my parents entered professions later in my childhood that would typically be considered middle-class. I am University educated, with a BA(hons) degree and MA degree; the latter I undertook part-time whilst continuing to work part-time in self-employment. Prior to my postgraduate studies, I balanced full-time self-employment with part-time caregiving responsibilities. I am disabled and my day-to-day activities are affected significantly by long-term health conditions. Suffering from chronic illness was my primary motivation for becoming self-employed in 2014 as it allowed me the flexibility to work around my health.

While I share some experiential commonalities with many of the women I interviewed, I do not assume shared understanding or universal experience. Instead, I remain attentive to how differences in race, class, sexuality, disability and other dimensions of social positioning mediate access to resources, shape platform experiences, and inflect entrepreneurial possibilities in ways that may not be visible from my own standpoint. I concur with Bryman's (2012) view that a researcher's identity and values cannot be detached from the research process and, therefore, reflexivity is essential. With this in mind, throughout the course of the project I critically reflected on my role as researcher and the impact that my positionality had on all stages of the research process, making notes of my reflections throughout.

I have also reflected on my position in relation to participants, which Dwyer and Buckle (2009) describe as "an essential and ever-present aspect of the investigation" (p. 55). I also draw on Dwyer and Buckle's concept of 'the space between', which suggests that a researcher can never be exactly the same as their participants, even if they are a member of their group, because they will always occupy the position of researcher as well. As a woman entrepreneur, who works with other women entrepreneurs and is part of a number of women in business communities, I am

enculturated (Spradley 1979) in the world of women's entrepreneurship and self-employment in the UK. This provided me with access to participants, familiarity with their language and concerns, and an existing network of contacts that supported recruitment. However, I am also a white, cisgender woman in my mid-thirties, educated to postgraduate level, and these intersecting identities inevitably shape my social and professional networks, as well as the assumptions I bring into the research. In light of this, I recognised the need to take a proactive approach to recruiting a diverse sample, rather than relying solely on my existing networks (see Section 5.1).

Beyond recruitment, I also remained reflexive about how my positionality continued to influence the research process more broadly, including how participants perceived and responded to me (discussed in Section 5.2), and how I interpreted and reported on their narratives during analysis and presentation. I was aware that my professional background may have shaped how participants perceived me, particularly in relation to social media expertise. Some participants expressed concern about whether their answers were "correct," especially in response to the question: *"What is your understanding of the phrase social media algorithm?"* I made it clear that there were no right or wrong answers and reassured participants that their intuitions, experiences and uncertainties were central to the project's aims. I reiterated this both when asking the question and after hearing their responses. Despite these efforts, I recognised that I could not fully neutralise the asymmetries inherent in the interview encounter. Participants may have wanted to exaggerate or downplay their knowledge of social media depending on how they perceived me. I sought to mitigate this by being transparent about my professional background while making clear that, in this context, I was participating as a researcher, not as a coach or evaluator.

My reflexivity also shaped how I adjusted the study as it developed. For example, a number of participants made comments about the fairness of algorithms and this led me to recognise the importance of this theme to participants. Consequently, I revised the interview schedule to include a direct question: "Do algorithms affect everyone equally?" This opened space for participants to speak about equality/inequality explicitly. At times, participants asked me what I thought. In

these moments, I encouraged them to share their own views first, before offering a brief response in which I acknowledged that some academic research has found that algorithmic systems do not affect all users equally, and that one aim of my project was to explore this question in the specific context of women's everyday entrepreneurship.

While I offered a relatively measured response in these moments, this was not because I lacked a view. On the contrary, my academic and professional experience has shown me that platform algorithms are entangled with existing inequalities, and that their effects are not evenly distributed. However, I did not want to impose this perspective on participants or position myself as the authority on their experiences. Instead, I prioritised a dialogic approach that allowed participants to shape the direction and tone of the conversation. In doing so, I was mindful of the power relations embedded in the research encounter, and sought to hold space for participants' own reflections, while gently signalling that this was a topic open to critical exploration.

Throughout the interviews, I sought to remain responsive and reflexive in how I engaged with participants. When participants reflected on their experiences of visibility, engagement or platform dynamics, I remained attentive to how these might be related to structural or social difference, including, but not limited to, ethnicity, socio-economic status, age and education. I did not presume which forms of identity or difference mattered most to each participant, but I asked gentle, open-ended follow-ups when it felt appropriate, aiming to create space for them to reflect, if they chose to, on how their social positioning may have shaped their experiences. For example, one participant repeatedly talked about her identity as a black entrepreneur and talked about her experiences of connecting with other black entrepreneurs on social media. I followed up on this by asking the participant if she felt there were any specific challenges she faced, as a black entrepreneur, when promoting her business on social media.

I occasionally shared emerging patterns or themes during interviews, but only when responding directly to participants' questions or comments. For example, when participants expressed doubt or uncertainty, such as wondering whether others also

felt confused by algorithmic changes or frustrated by inconsistent reach, I sometimes offered gentle reassurance that they were not alone in feeling that way. In other cases, participants explicitly asked whether other participants had said similar things, or whether what they were experiencing was common. In these moments, I responded with openness and care, not to steer the conversation, but to acknowledge the emotional intensity and precarity of navigating algorithmic platforms and entrepreneurial norms. These exchanges were shaped by a feminist ethics of attentiveness and care, which recognises that interviews are not neutral data collection events, but relational encounters grounded in trust, vulnerability, and mutual responsiveness (Ellis 2007). This approach reflects my broader commitment to relationality, in which meaning is shaped through situated, affectively attuned interaction rather than detached observation.

Relationality also meant acknowledging my emotional responses as part of the research process. Some interviews prompted strong feelings, particularly when participants expressed belief in algorithmic fairness and the idea that success on social media is purely a matter of hard work. These moments often left me feeling sad and frustrated, not at participants, but at the broader platform systems, economic structures, and cultural discourses that I felt had led them to internalise meritocratic narratives. I reflected on these emotional reactions and considered them analytically, asking myself what they revealed about the emotional labour of digital entrepreneurship, and what kinds of ideological work participants were doing to maintain hope, motivation or legitimacy in an increasingly precarious platform economy. These affective responses reminded me that I am situated, not only as a researcher but as someone emotionally and ethically invested in economic systems under scrutiny. Rather than distancing myself from these reactions, I treated them as part of the interpretive labour of feminist qualitative research (Pillow 2003).

There were also moments where I recognised, in hindsight, that I had missed opportunities to explore certain themes further. Sometimes I hesitated to ask follow-up questions that felt overly personal, particularly when participants disclosed difficult experiences but did not elaborate. In other instances, I only realised the significance of a comment during transcription or analysis. These silences are themselves meaningful. Moments where I hesitated to ask a question, where

participants paused or redirected the conversation, or where I later realised I had overlooked something significant, all offer insight into the affective and relational dynamics of the interview encounter.

Relationality and reflexivity were not tick boxes for me, but ongoing, situated practices. They involved staying present and attuned to the research dynamics, recognising my own role in shaping the production of knowledge, and attending to both what is said and what remains unsaid. Throughout the project, I kept reflexive notes that helped me notice when my assumptions surfaced, when my emotions were activated, and when I needed to listen more carefully to what participants were showing me. This approach is informed by Pillow's (2003) call for a reflexivity of discomfort, which does not aim to resolve contradiction or erase complexity but to sit with the tensions that inevitably arise in qualitative feminist research. Rather than viewing reflexivity as a method of sanitising the research process, I engage it as a space for ethical and epistemological accountability. It is a means of acknowledging that knowledge is always partial, affectively charged, and shaped by power.

Reflexivity informed every stage of this research process, from recruitment and relationship-building to ongoing dialogue with participants, as I go on to show in the next section, which details the semi-structured interviews that formed the core of my data collection.

4.5 Semi-Structured Interviews

This section outlines the methods used to generate empirical data through semi-structured interviews and ongoing asynchronous communication with participants. It includes an overview of participant sampling and recruitment, the process of conducting interviews, and the incorporation of follow-up communication via messages and email.

4.5.1 Participant Sampling and Recruitment

The recruitment strategy consisted of three components: social media outreach, in-person networking and snowball sampling, all of which worked concurrently.

In the early stages of recruitment I focused on approaching contacts within my existing professional and personal networks. This provided a strong starting point for recruitment as I am connected with a large number of self-employed women from a diverse range of backgrounds and the established trust and rapport I already have with these women meant that many of them were not only willing but also keen to participate in the study. A number of participants expressed to me that they were aware of my professional history and commitment to working with and supporting women in business and this encouraged them to participate in my research.

I recognised, however, that there were shortcomings in the diversity of my existing networks, particularly in terms of ethnicity and gender identity. Therefore, although I used my networks as a starting point for participant recruitment, I planned to use different channels for recruitment in order to improve the diversity of my sample, as detailed below.

I approached potential participants in my network directly via email, messenger services or telephone, based on what I already knew of their individual communication preferences. This recruitment strategy also incorporated snowball sampling as I asked my existing contacts to introduce me to other self-employed women who they thought might be willing to participate. In fact, some contacts were so keen to help that they offered to share the project details with other people before I had a chance to ask them myself. Snowball sampling was also utilised by asking participants at the end of interviews whether they knew anyone who might be interested in participating in the study.

Concurrently, I began attending in-person and virtual networking events which were primarily aimed at women in business. Initially, I handed a detailed participant information sheet to women who expressed interest in participating in the study (see Appendix 1). However, I quickly realised that this was a very detailed, formal and potentially overwhelming document and not ideal for securing the attention of busy entrepreneurs. Therefore, I designed a flyer which contained the most salient points from the information sheet and was written in participant-friendly language (Appendix 2). I also included photographs of myself so that participants knew who they would

be speaking with if they agreed to participate. Printed copies of the flyer were handed out at subsequent networking meetings.

A digital version of the flyer was then used to support online recruitment calls, which were published on social media. Recruitment calls were posted on Instagram, LinkedIn, X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook as I have followers on all four of these platforms and, based on my professional experience and project scoping, they are commonly used by women entrepreneurs in the UK. Prior to this, I had updated each of my social media profiles to reflect my role as a PhD researcher and the focus of my PhD research. Where platform affordances allowed, I included a link to my profile on the Department of Sociological Studies website to add credibility to my online profile. This was particularly important as many of my existing contacts know me in my previous professional role as a Social Media Manager and I felt it was important to emphasise that my role is now a PhD researcher with no commercial interests.

In order to address my research question about differences between different everyday women entrepreneurs, my aim was to recruit as diverse a sample as possible. With this in mind, I created an information form (Appendix 4) which participants were asked to complete along with the consent form (Appendix 3). The form included an introduction which explained to participants why I was asking for this information and how it would be used. It was also made clear to participants, both on the form and in correspondence, that all questions were optional and they should only answer those questions with which they feel comfortable. The form asked participants for the following information: age, primary source of income, household income, children, education / qualifications, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality and a free form box where participants could include any other details about themselves that they wished to share. I referred to the Government Statistical Service (GSS) Harmonisation standards to guide the formulation of the ethnicity, disability and educational attainment questions on the participant information form (GSS Harmonisation Team 2012). Household income was asked, rather than personal income, as the majority of participants lived in dual or multiple income households and I felt that this may affect their entrepreneurial practices and attitudes. 23 participants completed the participant information form and 5

participants did not. Based on the information gathered using this form, I was able to record and monitor the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants, which I will now present.

The study involved 28 women entrepreneurs, all based in the UK, from a range of demographic, educational, and professional backgrounds. All participants self-identified as women. All participants identified their gender as the same as that assigned at birth. 5 participants chose not to provide any demographic information. Some participants provided some demographic information but responded 'prefer not to answer' to specific questions.

Of the 28 participants, 23 provided their age, which ranged from 28 to 55, with a median age of 40. Figure 1 visualises the distribution of participant ages.

Participant Ages

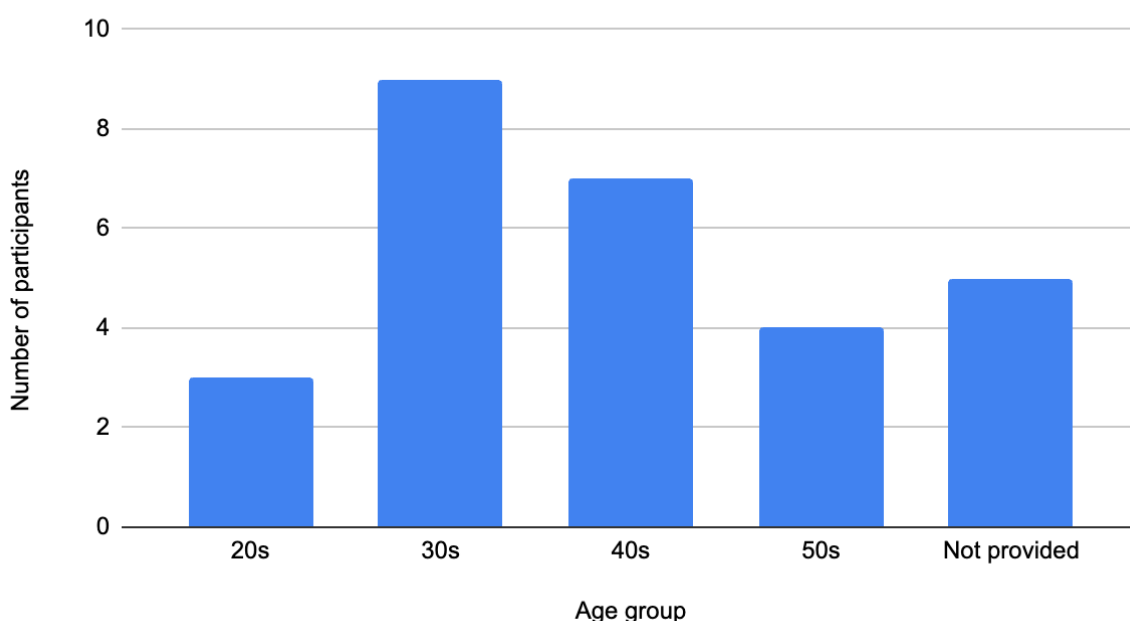


Figure 1: Number of participants in each age group (n=28)

22 participants identified their ethnicity on the participant information form. The ethnicity categories provided on the form were based on Government Statistical Service (GSS) Harmonisation standards, which includes open answer boxes for participants' to describe their ethnicity in their own terms. The range of ethnicities

represented in the study is visualised in Figure 2.

Participant Ethnicity Groups

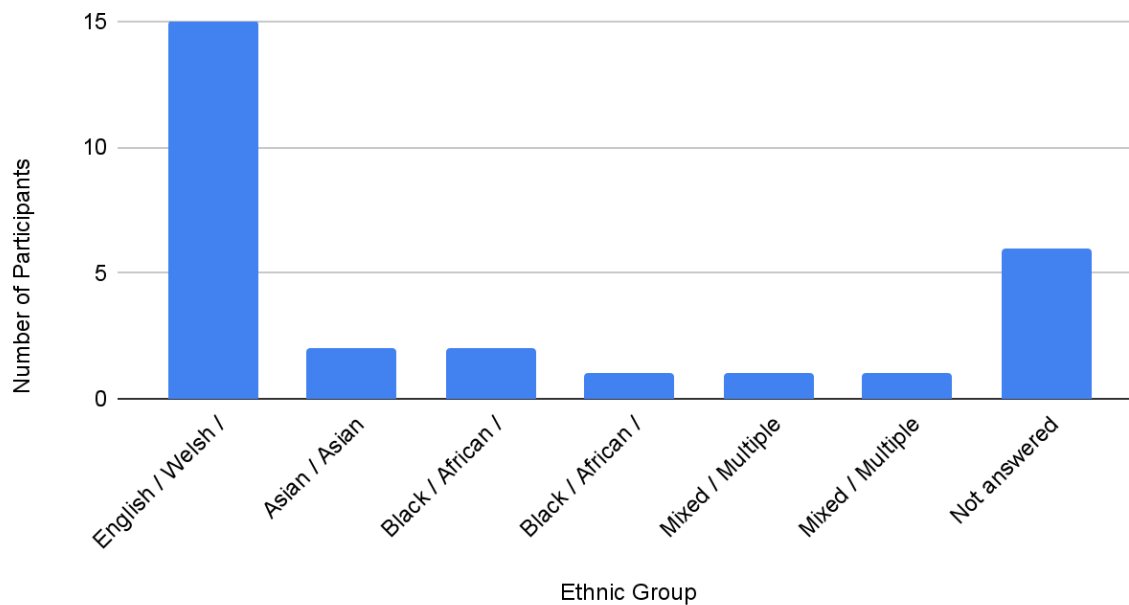


Figure 2: Number of participants in each ethnicity group (n=28)

19 participants answered the question about primary source of income. For most participants, self-employment was their primary source of income (n=19). A small number combined self-employment with paid employment (n=4). This is visualised in Figure 3.

Primary Source of Income

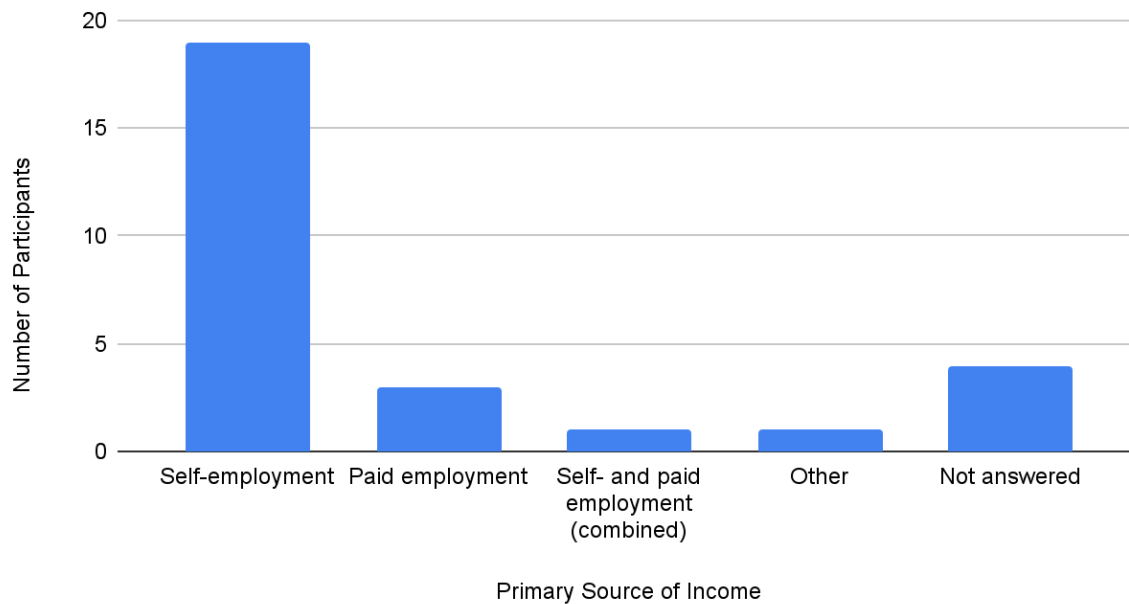


Figure 3: Participants' primary source of income (n=28)

18 participants provided information about their total annual household income. Reported figures ranged from under £10,000 to over £100,000, with the most common income bracket falling between £20,000 and £29,999 (n = 5). This is visualised in Figure 4.

Total Annual Household Income

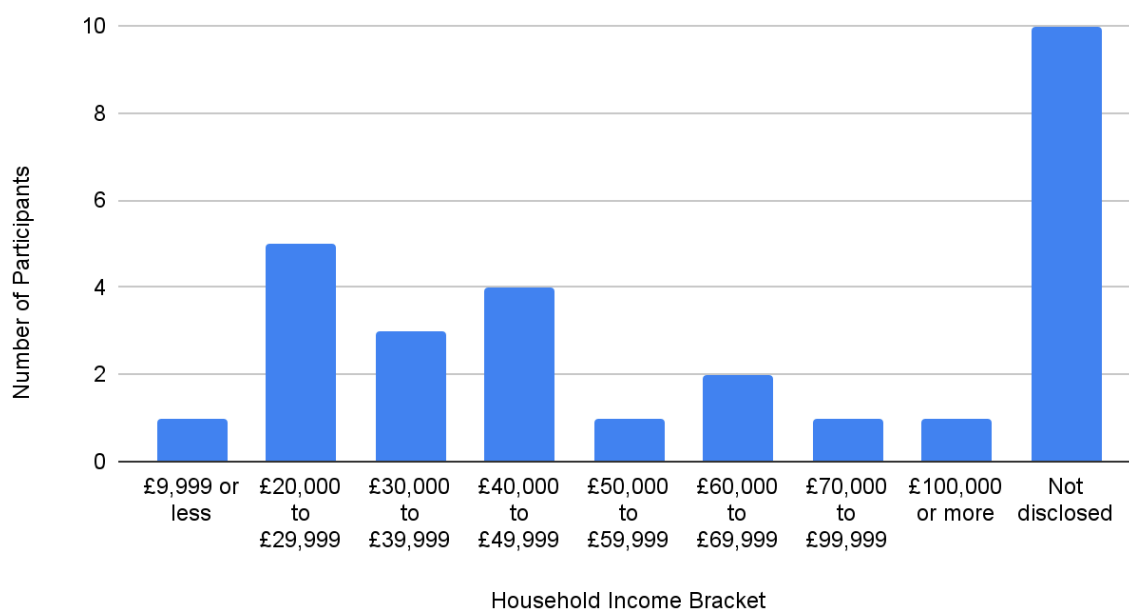


Figure 4: Participants' total annual household income (n=28)

Participants were asked whether they had a long-term condition or illness, and, if yes, whether their long-term condition or illness reduced their ability to carry out day-to-day activities. Their answers are visualised in Figures 5 and 6.

Long-term Condition or Illness

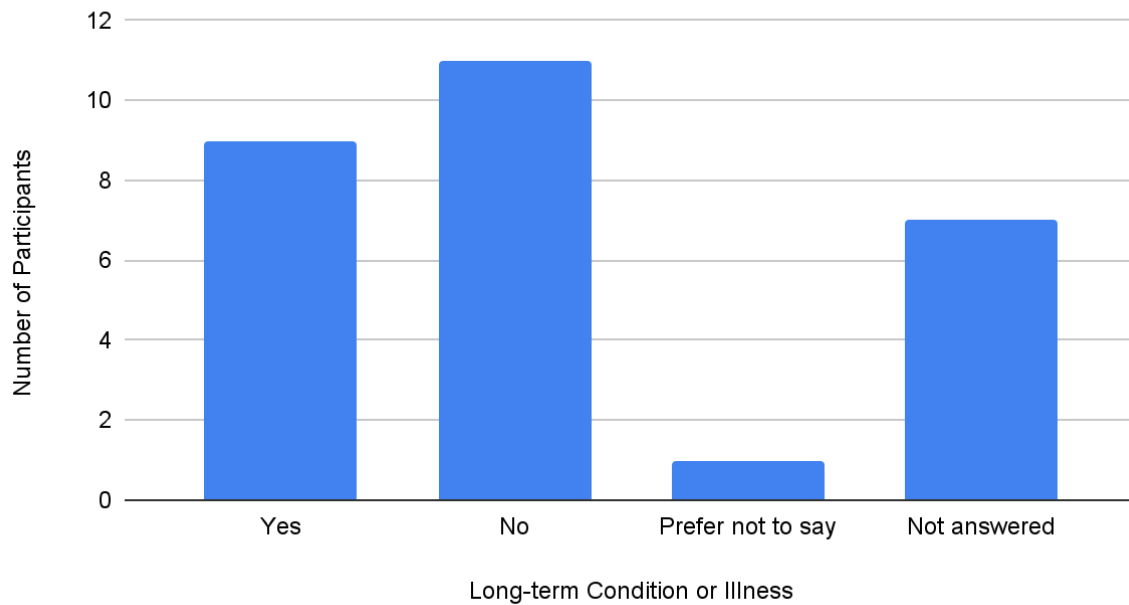


Figure 5: Participants answers to the long-term condition or illness question (n=28)

Reported Impact on Daily Activities

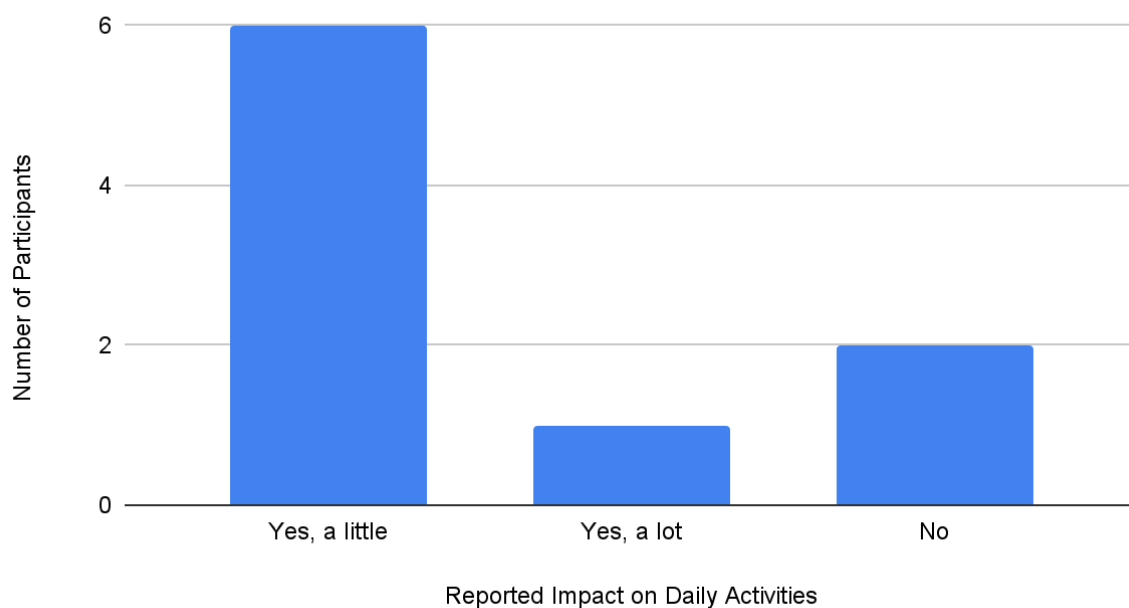


Figure 6: Participants' answers to whether their long-term condition or illness reduced their ability to carry out day-to-day activities (n=9)

An open question was asked: What is the highest educational or work-related qualification you have? Participant's described their qualifications in their own terms. Responses included vocational training, A-levels, professional certifications, undergraduate degrees, and postgraduate qualifications, and the responses are visualised in Figure 7.

Education & Qualifications

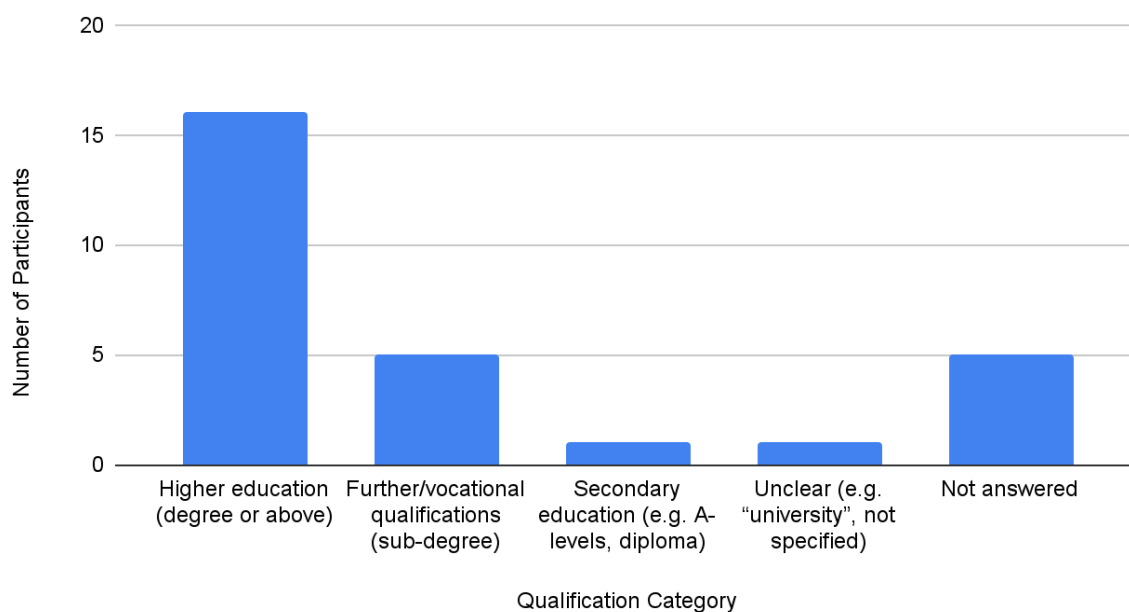


Figure 7: Participants' answers to the question about highest educational or work-related qualification (n=28)

11 participants had children under the age of 18 (Figure 8). The age of children ranged from infants to teenagers.

Parental Status

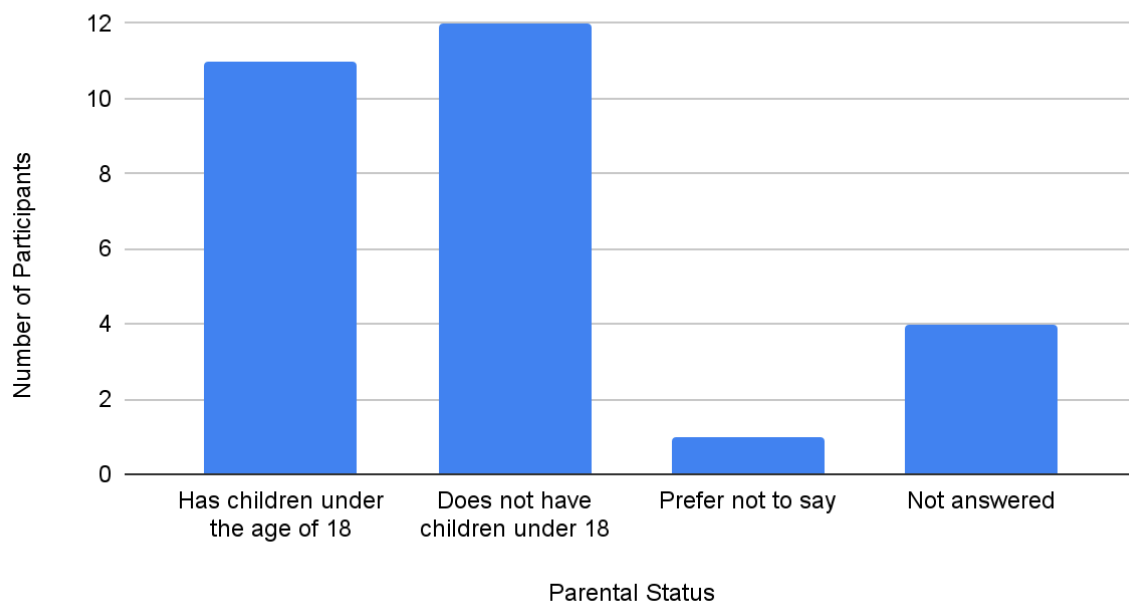


Figure 8: Participants' parental status (n=28)

Participants were also asked about their sexual orientation and their answers are visualised in Figure 9.

Sexual Orientation

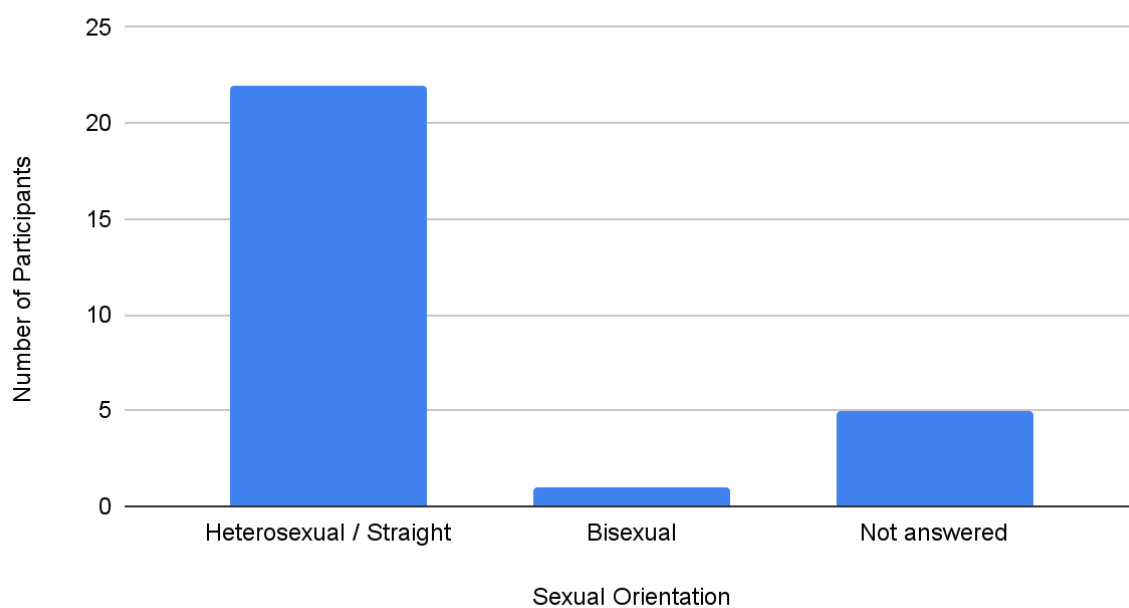


Figure 9: Participants' sexual orientation (n=28)

A detailed set of participant profiles, including occupational titles, social media platforms used, and self-described entrepreneurial aims, is provided in Appendix 5.

As data collection progressed, therefore, my approach to recruitment became increasingly focused on filling the diversity gaps that I was able to identify in my sample. In particular, there was a lack of diversity in terms of ethnicity and gender identity, which I aimed to address. At this stage I took a more proactive approach to recruitment via social media. LinkedIn and Instagram had proven to be particularly effective platforms on which to recruit participants and, due to the affordances of these platforms I was able to identify potential participants who were currently un- or under-represented in my sample and reach out to them directly with an invitation to participate in the study. For example, it was usually possible to discern a potential participant's line of business and thus I was able to approach different types of business owners. I also interacted with business communities that were established on social media, such as Black women in business and young entrepreneur networks, and approached some of their followers via direct message with invitations to participate. This proved to be a valuable strategy and a significant number of participants were recruited this way.

Despite concerted efforts to recruit a diverse sample, trans women and non-binary individuals who identify with aspects of womanhood proved difficult to reach. As discussed, my recruitment strategy involved identifying underrepresented individuals via publicly available information on social media accounts. However, this approach was largely ineffective in relation to this group, as gender identity was seldom disclosed in profiles. I identified only a small number of trans and non-binary focused business communities, and reached out to them, however most were largely inactive online at the time of recruitment and I did not receive any responses. I also contacted several LGBTQ+ organisations via email to request assistance with recruitment, but did not receive any responses. The limited visibility of trans and non-binary individuals in entrepreneurial spaces online must be understood in light of the disproportionate risks and harms they face on digital platforms and offline, including harassment, surveillance, and marginalisation (Duffy & Meisner 2022; Haimson and Hoffman 2016).

While the absence of trans and non-binary participants in this study is a limitation, it also constitutes a significant empirical finding that underscores the barriers to inclusion in research on digital entrepreneurship. One trans woman responded to my recruitment message on LinkedIn to explain that participating in the study would make her too visible, which she described as dangerous given the heightened risk of online harassment. She also warned that including trans women in the study could expose me, as the researcher, to targeted abuse. Another trans woman shared that she had experienced multiple negative encounters with researchers conducting studies about trans communities, and now only felt comfortable engaging in anonymous, quantitative surveys. These interactions reveal the deep-seated concerns about safety, visibility, and the ethics of participation that shape trans womens' and non-binary individuals' relationships to research (Henrickson et al 2020). There is a pressing need to develop practices for entrepreneurship research that actively address these risks and work towards meaningful inclusion, particularly in relation to studying the algorithmic sense-making of those who face unique and often compounded challenges in being visible, safe, and economically viable online.

The following table provides brief descriptions of each participant's business. Job titles and descriptions are based on participant's responses in interviews and participant information forms, and I use the language that they themselves used. Consequently, some of the job titles may seem unusual or unfamiliar, but are contextualised by the accompanying descriptions. More information about each participant, including demographic information provided by participants, can be found in Appendix 5.

Participant pseudonym	Brief description of participant's business
Elizabeth	Elizabeth is a Dance Teacher who runs adult dance based fitness classes for adults. She also teaches dance to children at a local Dance School.
Natalie	Natalie provides online business development services to individuals who have online businesses. This includes graphic design, planning, organisation, and personal and business development.
Phoebe	Phoebe is an Astrologer who specialises in the lunar cycles, helping people with personal growth and development. She sells astrology

	reports, and online courses on subjects such as creative journaling related to astrology, and occasionally sells artwork that is informed by her spiritual practice.
Alison	Alison is a Visual Impact Specialist who designs brands for small businesses, including social media templates and website graphics.
Suzanne	Suzanne is a mobile Dog Groomer. She has a mobile dog grooming van and delivers her services across South Yorkshire, and surrounding areas.
Sophie	Sophie makes and sells crystal jewellery, crystal bundles, and crystal grids that she creates herself. She also creates and sells products to educate women about how to use crystals effectively, offers one-to-one video consultations, and is currently in the process of creating ebooks.
Diane	Diane is a Costume-maker who makes custom dancewear for children.
Jessica	Jessica is a Health and Wellness Coach who works with women to help them build confidence and improve their self-esteem, primarily through a one-to-one coaching service. She is also developing nutrition-based services.
Kimberley	Kimberley creates what she describes as detective games with a historical twist. She is also a YouTuber and Podcaster, creating and publishing true crime related content. Recently she has begun creating and selling historical true-crime related city tours, used as icebreaker activities for corporate events.
Nadia	Nadia is a Private Tutor for children of primary and secondary school ages. She tutors children on a one-to-one basis.
Fran	Fran offers one-to-one business coaching and personal development coaching and mentoring for professionals. She specialises in menopause coaching and menopause workshops and seminars. She incorporates holistic practices, such as meditation, into her coaching services.
Michelle	Michelle is a mobile Sports Massage Therapist, who specialises in pain management. She also works with people in end-of-life home care and people undergoing cancer treatment.
Claire	Claire provides business coaching services to women entrepreneurs. She delivers one-to-one coaching addressing topics such as goal setting and finance. Alongside her core business, she also provides consultancy services to a University and occasionally supports businesses with grant writing.

Laura	Laura provides career coaching, primarily to young women. She also offers corporate training and facilitation focused on career development.
Bhavana	Bhavana is a Holistic Therapist who practices Reiki, sound healing, and colour therapy.
Hannah	Hannah is a Writer who supports businesses in the funeral industry with marketing and messaging. She also delivers talks and lectures, based on her personal experiences.
Catherine	Catherine runs self-care events mainly for women. Her events include vision board sessions that are centered on wellbeing, and a bullet journaling club.
Vanessa	Vanessa sells hair accessories, mostly head wraps which she makes using fabrics from Africa. She also uses African fabrics to make home accessories. Additionally, she holds workshops to teach people how to style head wraps.
Farrah	Farrah has two self-employed roles; one as a Bookkeeper and the other as a Perfume Retailer. She chose to focus our discussion in the interview on her perfume business.
Hulwi	Hulwi provides one-to-one coaching for Muslim women who are stressed. During coaching sessions, she works with clients on issues such as values, anxiety, and stress.
Rachel	Rachel describes her business as a Property Portfolio Building Company. Her service includes finding properties for clients, and renovating and renting those properties.
Summer	Summer is an Energy Healer, Reiki Master practitioner, and Animal Reiki practitioner. She practices healing on animals and humans (mainly women).
Alice	Alice works with employers to promote happiness and wellbeing in workplaces. She delivers her services through talks, workshops, away days, and lunch and learn sessions.
Lily	Lily provides services to female entrepreneurs that are designed to help them outsource and delegate effectively. She also provides admin and tech support to entrepreneurs.
Julia	Julia provides health coaching and personal training services. Her services are delivered one-to-one and to groups.
Nia	Nia is a Skincare and Facials Specialist. She provides facial treatments to women in and around her local area, including brides-to-be and skincare parties.

Melissa	Melissa is an Embroider who produces customised work and leisure wear, such as uniforms.
Erica	Erica is a Business Consultant who supports women entrepreneurs. She is also developing a new business which will offer nutritional education and support to women, predominantly over 35, and nutrition support for children and adults with mental health challenges.

Table 1: Summary of participants: pseudonyms and business descriptions

4.5.2 Conducting Interviews

28 semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and December 2023, each interview lasting between 30 - 90 minutes. Participants were given the opportunity to choose how the interview was conducted; whether in-person, online or over the phone. Due to the geographic spread of participants, who were located throughout the UK, 26 participants opted for online video interviews conducted via Google Meet or Zoom. One local participant opted for an in-person interview and one participant provided answers to the interview questions via email as she was repeatedly unable to attend the online interviews we scheduled due to last minute work commitments, indicative of the demands of being both self-employed and employed simultaneously.

The development of the interview schedule (Appendix 6) was guided by the aims and objectives of the research. I drew on empirical studies of digital entrepreneurship and platform labour (e.g. Duffy and Hund 2019; Cotter 2019; Bishop 2019) to identify key themes and areas of inquiry, including visibility, engagement, content strategy, and the affective dimensions of platform use. Rather than aiming to assess technical knowledge, I designed open-ended questions that invited participants to share their experiences, reflections, and interpretations, including moments of uncertainty or speculation. This approach allowed space for participants' situated and affective accounts to emerge and reflected my broader feminist commitment to valuing experiential and intuitive forms of knowledge.

The interview schedule was structured around three key areas which relate to the research questions; 1) background information, 2) social media use and 3)

algorithms. Questions were ordered so as to allow participants the opportunity to warm up and build rapport with myself as the interviewer, as well as to ensure that I was able to gain a good understanding of their business before exploring how they use social media and attempt to make sense of algorithms.

Before I asked any questions about algorithms specifically, I asked participants for their understanding of the phrase 'social media algorithm'. After listening to their answer, I read out loud a brief definition of the term, as follows:

"Algorithms are used by social media platforms for a variety of purposes, including recommending content and people to follow and deciding who to show your posts to. However, social media platforms tell us very little about how their algorithms work.

We do know that algorithms take into account lots of different factors to decide which posts to show to which users but we don't know exactly what these factors are or how exactly algorithms work on different social media platforms."

My feminist approach to research, particularly the commitment to rejecting epistemic hierarchies (see Section 3.2), informed my decision to share this definition of 'social media algorithms' with participants. This was not intended to shape or restrict their responses, but to create an inclusive and supportive conversational space, in which participants could reflect on their experiences without feeling they needed technical literacy or specialist knowledge. The definition was designed to be clear and non-specialist, drawing on academic literature but avoiding technical jargon. Offering this shared definition was intended to reduce pressure on participants to "perform" expertise and to foster a sense that everyday experiences and uncertainties were valued. In this sense, the decision to define algorithms was not just a methodological choice but an ethical one, shaped by my commitment to feminist research that values situated understandings and reduces barriers to participation.

Despite these efforts, as I reflect in Section 4 of this chapter, I am aware that some participants may have felt the need to exaggerate or downplay their familiarity with social media algorithms, particularly if they perceived me as having expertise in this area. This highlights the subtle but persistent ways in which power, perception, and social positioning shape qualitative interviews, even when efforts are made to create an open and inclusive conversational space (England 1994).

By adopting a semi-structured interview format, it was possible to be flexible, allowing participants to guide the flow where relevant and for me to ask questions in a different order in response to how participants were responding and directing the conversation. For example, some participants brought up algorithms early on in their interviews, particularly in reference to the aims and objectives of my study. When this occurred, I would ask for their understanding of the term and read the definition to them earlier so that we could continue the conversation in an organic yet meaningful way. Furthermore, I would sometimes ask clarifying questions or request further information to gain more details about a subject they were discussing.

As well as maintaining flexibility and openness during the interviews, throughout the data collection period I reflected on the interviews and amended the interview schedule where I thought questions could be improved or additional questions could be added to generate more rich data.

4.5.3 Ongoing Communication With Participants

At the conclusion of the interviews, participants were invited to contact me in the coming months if they had any updates or new reflections that they would like to share with me. I also asked them for permission to contact them, via their preferred method of communication, with follow up questions. In this way, I recognised that meaning-making often continues beyond the interview encounter (Gunaratnam 2003). Ongoing communication of this nature was accounted for in my ethics procedure and formal consent for such communication was requested via the consent form.

Participants were generally enthusiastic about the potential of follow up conversations and some pro-actively communicated with me on a periodic basis to share with me updates about their business, their activity on social media and their thoughts and feelings about algorithms. Some participants shared screenshots to illustrate their experiences of interacting with platforms, particularly with regards to platform nudges and analytic dashboards. Whenever such communications took place, I confirmed with the participant whether they were happy for me to include the conversation in my data set. I felt it was important to ask this on each confirmation, despite the participant already giving informed consent, as the communications happened over the course of several months. Furthermore, as I became friendly with participants, particularly those who were in regular contact, I felt they might message me on occasion with the feeling of speaking to a friend or confidant about their business and may not intend for every conversation to be used as data. I conducted follow-up interviews with two participants who had sent me updates via Messenger and expressed a desire to speak further in order to provide additional context to their messages.

Upon completion of 28 interviews I felt that I had reached theoretical saturation (Charmaz 2014) and had achieved as much diversity within the sample as was going to be possible given time constraints and the recruitment challenges outlined above.

4.6 Participant Observation

4.6.1 Sampling and Recruitment

Participant observation (PO) involves spending a prolonged period of time observing the practices, communication and culture of a group of participants (Bryman 2012). In my professional experience, I have noticed that Facebook Groups are key sites where algorithmic sense-making happens and self-employed women discuss their social media practices with one another. Therefore, I planned to carry out participant observation in Facebook Groups aimed at everyday women entrepreneurs.

Online participant observation was not to be necessarily limited to Facebook Groups. Facebook provides a starting point but, through participant observation, I hoped to

discover other places where self-employed women engage in algorithmic sense-making. As Bishop (2019) observes, “communities very rarely stay, and their experiences are very rarely experienced on one site, platform or space” (p. 2594). Should other sites of algorithmic sense-making emerge, I intended to widen the scope of my participant observation to include these sites, if possible. As Hine (2015) suggests, when carrying out internet ethnography the field should be understood as emergent and it is therefore difficult to define in fixed terms in advance. Furthermore, Pink and Postill (2012) describe the internet as a “messy fieldwork environment” and argue that users tend to “criss-cross” a range of platforms (p. 131). Therefore, the researcher should be willing to traverse multiple ‘ethnographic places’, including offline as well as online contexts.

Additionally, I am aware from my professional experience that members of Facebook Groups for self-employed women do not necessarily limit their conversations to discussions of Facebook. Instead, they tend to talk about the variety of social media platforms that they use. This is relevant to my research design as I am not focusing on one single social media platform but all platforms that are used by my participants.

In designing this research project, my intention was to begin by selecting five Facebook groups using purposive sampling (Bryman 2012); meaning that the groups would be selected groups strategically based on my research questions and the aim of investigating the differences amongst self-employed women (RQ3).

In order to ensure that data collection was fruitful yet manageable, and that participant consent could practically be obtained (see ethics section), I planned to approach groups with up to 1000 members. It was felt that five Facebook groups should provide enough breadth to generate rich data that addresses the research questions, whilst also ensuring I was able to pursue other opportunities for participant observation as they emerged.

As this study focuses on self-employed women in the UK, group admins would be asked to confirm that the majority of their members are self-employed, women and based in the UK. However, because individual Facebook users control their privacy

settings and disclosure of personal information, it is not always possible for group admins to be certain of their member's demographics.

As discussed above, my project does not focus on a specific sector or industry, but aims to research the experiences of self-employed women who fall outside of the influencer and creative sectors that have dominated existing literature. This informed the sampling strategy, along with the aim of investigating differences between different groups of self-employed women (RQ3). Thus, I intended for the sample to be made up of the following types of Facebook groups:

- 2 general groups (nationwide) - for example, 'Women in Business UK'
- 2 sector specific groups (nationwide or local) - for example, 'Yorkshire Women's Wellness Network'
- 1 local group (not sector specific) - for example, 'Sheffield Women Who Thrive Networking Society'

Conditions of membership vary in terms of the financial cost to members; some being free of charge and moderated by volunteers and others that require payment for membership, usually as part of another service, such as business and marketing support or organised networking groups.

4.6.2 Data Collection and Challenges

In online groups, I planned to collect data by writing detailed field notes about the conversations I observed that relate to social media, marketing, platform visibility and algorithms, in order to address RQ1, RQ2 and RQ4. Close attention would also be paid to differences that emerge between and within different demographic groups, to address RQ3.

However, online participant observation proved to be challenging and the data gathered via this method was limited. I gained access to a Facebook group with 50 members, which was administered by a business coach with whom I have an existing professional relationship. Members of the group paid a monthly subscription fee to the admin to be part of the group, which was intended to be a private business

mastermind group where members could receive advice and support from the admin and fellow group members. I observed this group for a period of 12 months (January - December 2023). However, I found that limited discussion about social media, algorithms or online visibility took place and, therefore, limited data was collected. In January 2024, the group admin announced that the group was going to be archived, effective immediately. The admin specifically stated that a number of changes made by Meta to the functionality of Facebook Groups had led to them feeling that Groups were no longer an effective platform upon which to build community and deliver support in a group setting. Specifically, they felt that the removal of the 'Rooms' feature had made it difficult to create regular connection with ease.

During this time, I attempted to gain access to several other Facebook Groups, based on the sampling strategy outlined above. This involved identifying Groups which fit my criteria and then obtaining the contact details for the group admin(s). However, obtaining contact information was only possible where it was listed in the group's 'About' section. I approached 12 Facebook Group admins in this way and did not receive any responses. Subsequently, I focused on trying to identify appropriate groups, whether on Facebook or alternative platforms, by talking to my interview participants.

In interviews, participants were asked where (if anywhere) they sought advice or answers to questions about social media, algorithms and/or visibility, and whether they discussed these topics with other business owners. Several participants told me about groups they were members of on various platforms, namely Facebook, Slack and Discord. All of the groups mentioned were part of business coaching or training programmes that individuals had paid to participate in. I asked these participants if they would introduce me to the group admins, with the hope that I could observe these spaces, and whilst all participants expressed willingness they did not introduce me to the admins and so I was unable to gain access to any of these spaces. In summary, although this aspect of my data collection did not go to plan, a small amount of data was gathered and has contributed to my analysis.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

4.7.1 Informed Consent and Ethics of Care

Ethical research principles were followed throughout the course of this study. Before agreeing to take part in the study, participants were sent an information sheet (Appendix 1 - Interview Participants; Appendix 7 - Participant Observation) that introduced the project in straightforward, non-technical language. It explained that algorithms are used by platforms to recommend content and determine what users see, but that not much is known about how self-employed women attempt to understand algorithms nor how their understanding of algorithms influences their social media practices. I also outlined the broader aim of the research; to support better understanding among academics, policymakers, and organisations working with women in business. When formulating the language for the information sheets, I was mindful of feminist principles of accessibility and inclusion, aiming to minimise jargon and make the purpose and process of the research clear and approachable to participants (Brannelly and Barnes 2022). I wanted to signal early on that participants were not expected to have technical knowledge, and that their experiences, intuitions, and uncertainties were central to the project's focus.

Being clear about the aims and objectives of the study was particularly important during recruitment, when several potential participants expressed concern that they “might not be suitable” for the study because they did not know a great deal about algorithms. In these moments, I reassured them that the research was not seeking expert knowledge, but instead aimed to explore how women make sense of algorithms in everyday, often uncertain, ways. These conversations further confirmed the need for a research approach that not only resists epistemic hierarchies (Alcoff and Potter 1993), but actively creates space for forms of knowledge that are intuitive, affective, and partial. Responding to these concerns was part of an ongoing commitment to feminist ethics of care (Brannelly and Barnes 2022), and helped foster the kind of trust and openness that shaped my interactions with participants throughout the research. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants and it was made clear to participants that they could withdraw their consent at any time.

With regards to participant observation, the administrator of the Facebook Group (henceforth referred to as 'the mastermind group', which is a pseudonym based on how participants sometimes referred to the group) under observation provided informed consent. Ideally, I would have sought informed consent from each group member. However, at the outset it was decided that this would be unmanageable as it was my objective to conduct participant observation in groups with up to 1,000 members. Furthermore, there were varying levels of engagement from members in the group that was eventually observed and this raises the question of whether the study can go ahead if some members respond but some do not.

Upon joining the mastermind group, I published an introductory post that explained who I am, the project aims and objectives, what I would be doing in the group and what data would be collected (see Figure 10). Consistent with my commitment to feminist research ethics, I used informal language in this post and shared detailed information about myself, including my background and motivation. I created a participant information site using Google Sites (Appendix 8) and included the link in my introductory post so that participants could easily access more detailed information about the project, including specific details of my activity in the mastermind group. The participant information site also included an embedded form, so that participants could opt out and/or withdraw from the study as quickly and easily as possible.

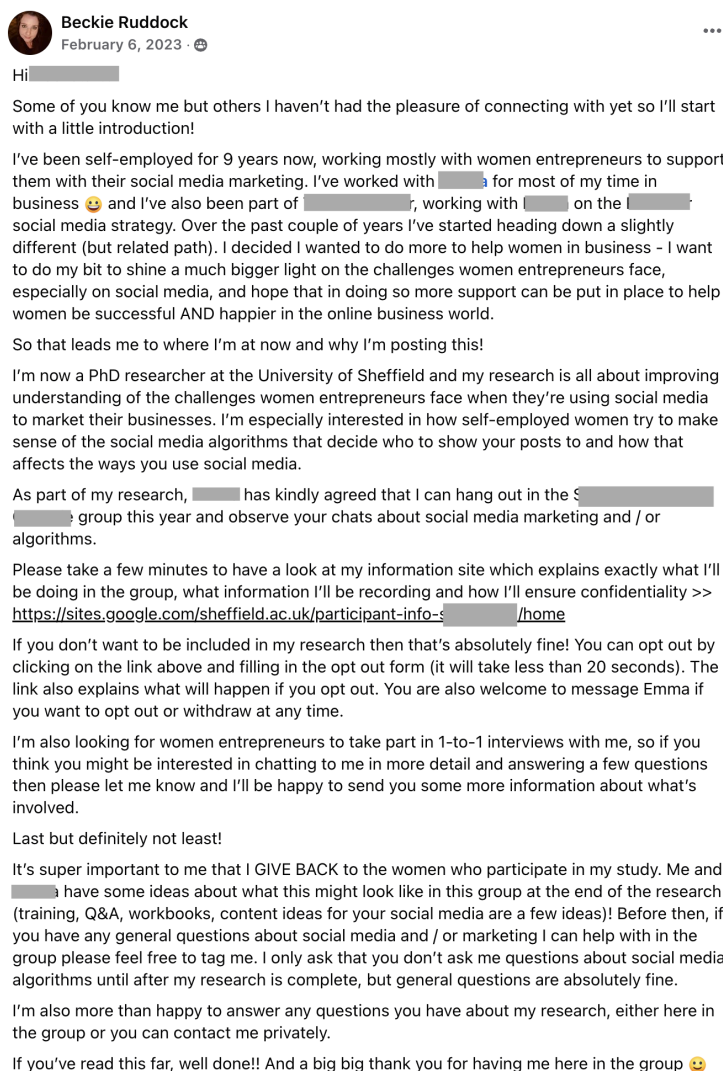


Figure 10: Screenshot of the introductory post in the mastermind group - references that could identify the group have been redacted.

Although minimal data was collected via this method, due to minimal activity in the Facebook group, where relevant posts or comments were made I asked users if they were happy for me to collect their posts / comments as data. As mentioned in Section 3.5.1, this was important due to the data collection period spanning several months as participants may have forgotten that I was collecting data from the group.

Finally, during ongoing communications with participants, as outlined in Section 3.5.1, some participants chose to share with me screenshots from their social media accounts. As this was unanticipated at the beginning of the study, I submitted an amendment request to my ethics application for this data to be collected and included in my analysis and output. The amendment was approved. In accordance

with ethics approval, participants were asked for permission for their screenshots to be included in the data set and to potentially be included in research outputs. Where participant-provided screenshots have been included, anonymity and confidentiality has been maintained by covering or blurring any identifying information. All data was stored on my Google Drive, provided by the University of Sheffield. I am the only person who had access to the data.

Although this project is fairly low risk, the research deals with issues relating to gender inequality. This meant that there was a possibility of sensitive topics being brought up in interviews, such as gender inequality, discrimination, harassment, racism, homophobia and / or ableism. It was made clear to participants that they could refuse to answer any question and may end the interview at any point. I was also prepared to signpost participants to support from third-party organisations, including Samaritans, Women's Resource Centre and Regard, at the end of interviews if any sensitive topics have been discussed, although the need did not arise.

A feminist commitment to reciprocity informed how I approached the research relationship (Brannelly and Barnes 2022). Throughout the study, I was open to participants' questions about my background, motivation, and the aims and objectives of the project. I also invited suggestions about how they might like to access the findings. I remained open to participants' questions about the aims and scope of the project at all stages, not only prior to interviews, but throughout our interactions. If participants wanted to discuss particular issues in more depth, including those related to social media, algorithms, and entrepreneurship, I was willing to engage in conversations and share reflections where appropriate. I was also open to answering questions about my PhD experience and future plans, as well as more personal questions if participants wanted to know more about me. This openness reflects a feminist ethic of care and dialogue, in which participants are not treated merely as data sources but as meaning-makers whose curiosity and insight shape the research encounter (Harding 1987).

I view non-academic dissemination not simply as an academic obligation but as an ethical responsibility to ensure that the research is accessible and meaningful to the

communities it concerns. As stated earlier in this chapter, the study was designed for women, in the sense that it aims to produce knowledge that is meaningful, usable and politically relevant. To this end, I plan to share the findings with women entrepreneurs and with organisations that support women's entrepreneurship, in formats that are tailored to their needs and practices. This might include podcasts, blogs, workshops and presentations.

During the early stages of data collection, I also engaged in conversations with the admin of the mastermind Facebook group I observed about the possibility of offering a workshop or training session(s) as a form of giving back to the group. I extended an open invitation to group members to contact me with suggestions for reciprocal outputs that would be relevant or valuable to them. Although the group closed in January 2024, before the research was completed, these discussions shaped my ongoing commitment to reciprocity and reinforced the importance of thinking creatively and collaboratively about how research can be returned to those who make it possible.

The data generated in this project will not be shared. As it is qualitative in nature, it cannot be recreated exactly. Moreover, extracts from interview transcripts and participant messages could be taken out of context by individuals or organisations not involved in the original research process, raising ethical concerns around interpretation and participant privacy.

4.7.2 Choosing and Using Pseudonyms

In order to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, pseudonyms have been used to refer to all participants in transcripts, data collected from ongoing communications and the Facebook Group, field notes and in this thesis. At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they would like to choose a pseudonym or whether they would like a pseudonym to be chosen for them. A matrix of pseudonyms was kept in a secure University-provided Google Drive, separate from the research data, and only I had access to this matrix. Transcripts and field notes

were anonymised by redacting business and participant names. Where other individuals were referred to by participants, names were redacted.

As most participants asked me to select a pseudonym for them, I reflected early on in the process about the meaning and importance that is attached to names. I considered it important to reflect the diverse identities of participants in my research output by choosing pseudonyms that were culturally appropriate to each participant. Additionally, I recognised that names can also trigger feelings, which could be negative or positive. A participant might read my research output and feel negatively triggered because they associate the pseudonym I have chosen for them with a person in their lives.

Before selecting a pseudonym, I would first consult the participant information form and the interview transcript to gain an understanding of the participant's background. I then used Google to get an idea of the origin of the name. I then looked up names with a similar origin, for example Arabic names, and selected a pseudonym from the list. Although this is not a perfect strategy, I felt that it was a sensitive way to select an initial pseudonym. I then contacted each participant with the suggested pseudonym and asked them if they were happy for this name to be used to refer to them. All participants responded that they were happy with the assigned pseudonym.

I also felt that it was important to capture a description of their business and work in their own words. Therefore during the interviews I asked each participant how they would like their occupation to be referred to in my thesis. When referring to individual participants, I use the descriptor provided to me by the participant in order to respect their self-definition. As a result, some of the occupational descriptors used in this thesis may appear unfamiliar or unconventional. This reflects my decision to prioritise participants' own framings of their work, rather than imposing pre-existing occupational categories. This approach aligns with the broader epistemological commitment of this study to value situated knowledge and recognise participants as meaning-makers whose lived experiences and identifications are analytically significant. An anonymised list of participant descriptors can be found in Table 1, above, and a more detailed list is in Appendix 5.

4.8 Data Analysis

Most of the interviews were conducted via Google Meet. To transcribe them, the in-built auto-transcription functionality was used. One interview was conducted via Zoom. Auto-transcription was not used, as I was not familiar with this feature in Zoom prior to the interview. Therefore, I manually transcribed the Zoom interview using the audio recording. One interview took place in-person; I used Google Meet to record the audio of this interview and used the in-built auto-transcription tool.

As the Google Meet host, I received the transcripts directly to my University-provided Google Drive, and I was the only individual with access to these files. Transcripts and recordings were encrypted in transit and at rest, in accordance with Google's privacy policy for Google Workspace for Education (Google 2024). However, as my use of Google Meet was facilitated through the University's institutional Google Workspace account, the University retains administrative control over the account and may access or export data stored in my University Drive, in accordance with its policies on data governance and compliance. Although transcripts were treated confidentially and stored securely, it is important to acknowledge that data generated through automated transcription is entangled with platform-level data infrastructures and institutional policies, and not governed solely by the researcher (Bokhove and Downey 2018). These issues were considered as part of the ethical review process, and approval was granted by the University Research Ethics Committee.

Using Google Meet auto-transcription enabled me to generate what Bokhove and Downey (2018) term "good enough" first transcriptions which I could then edit to improve accuracy. I did this by listening back to each interview recording, as many times as necessary, and amending transcripts as necessary in order to correct any mistakes or omissions. This was also valuable as it allowed me to immerse in and familiarise myself with the data. I immersed myself in the data further by reading each transcript multiple times, making notes and annotations as I did so. I also returned to the transcripts repeatedly throughout the data analysis and write up process.

Ongoing communications with participants, for which consent was obtained for the messages to be used as data, were copied and pasted into an appendix at the end of the individual's interview transcript, with clear notes detailing how and when the data was collected. Storing these notes alongside transcripts was beneficial as it allowed me to analyse the narrative provided by individual participants which, in some cases, was built over a period of 12 months.

Although data collected via participant observation was limited, a small amount of data was collected from the one participating Facebook Group. I did this by taking screenshots of relevant posts in the group (only those that pertained to social media, marketing, platform visibility and algorithms). These screenshots were stored in Google Drive, and subsequently imported into Nvivo for analysis.

My approach to data analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis. This aligns with my interpretivist and constructionist epistemology, viewing meaning as socially situated and co-constructed, and recognising the researcher as an active and reflexive interpreter. Themes were not treated as emerging from the data, but as constructed through an iterative, interpretative process shaped by my positionality, theoretical framework, and ongoing interpretation (Braun, Clarke, and Hayfield 2019; Braun and Clarke 2023).

Analysis began with repeated, immersive readings of the interview transcripts and fieldnotes, during which I made margin notes to record my initial reflections, observations, and questions. These early engagements supported the development of initial themes, which Braun and Clarke (2019) define as "patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept" (p. 589). Theme development was recursive and interpretative, refined through movement between individual transcripts, reflexive writing, and my evolving conceptual framework. My process was deliberately non-linear, consistent with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, where meaning is co-produced through sustained, situated engagement with the data (Braun and Clarke 2023).

I used NVivo to support the organisation and exploration of my data, applying codes to lines or sections of transcripts as part of an active, interpretative process. Coding

functioned as a flexible and generative tool to support theme development over time (Braun and Clarke 2020). This process was iterative, non-linear, and creative, shaped by my evolving analytic insights and engagement with the data. A single passage could be assigned multiple codes where it touched on intersecting ideas or analytic possibilities. For example, one excerpt might simultaneously relate to metrics, success, theories about algorithms, and advice from expert figures. In reflexive thematic analysis, “coding is open and organic, with no use of any coding framework. Themes should be the final ‘outcome’ of data coding and iterative theme development” (Braun & Clarke 2020). Rather than seeking consistency or replicability in coding, therefore, I used coding as a way to think with the data and generate patterns of shared meaning across the dataset.

In line with Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive approach to thematic analysis I treated coding, theme development, and writing as iterative and interdependent processes. Writing was an analytic tool in itself, helping me to clarify, rework, and extend my interpretations. I initially coded across the dataset using an open and organic approach, generating a broad set of codes that included uncertainty, sense-making, metrics, platform feedback, criticism and harassment, comparison to influencers, confidence, training, and platform dependency, among others. Before beginning to write, I developed an initial set of themes that mapped broadly onto three conceptual areas: affective and intuitive forms of sense-making (Chapter Five), practices of interpreting metrics and feedback in order to make sense of algorithms (Chapter Six), and differences in how sense-making and practices are engaged with in relation to participants' social positioning and platform norms (Chapter Seven). As I wrote each chapter, these themes were refined, regrouped, and further specified in dialogue with the data. For example, codes such as uncertainty, emotion, trial and error and reverse engineering were drawn together to explore the intuitive and affective qualities of algorithmic sense-making, which I discuss in Chapter Five. Chapter Six develops a thematic focus on metrics and quantification by drawing on codes including metrics, return on investment (ROI), platform feedback, evaluation, and visibility strategies. Chapter Seven brings together a more critical focus on difference, inequality and constraint through the analysis of codes such as confidence, skills and learning, platform governance, criticism and harassment, and training. These thematic groupings were constructed and refined through sustained

analytic engagement, allowing me to address my research questions while attending to variation, contradiction, and the affective dimensions of participants' narratives.

Throughout the process of coding, theme development, and writing I revisited transcripts and, at times, re-listened to audio recordings to deepen my understanding of particular moments or to explore the tone and affective weight of participants' accounts. I also used NVivo to conduct targeted searches as new analytic insights took shape. For example, examining whether participants used similar terms to describe algorithms, such as "mystery," or "hidden". These searches were not intended to quantify responses or assess frequency, but to support a richer, more contextualised understanding of how participants made sense of social media algorithms. My analysis remained attentive to variation, contradiction, and the affective dimensions of participants' narratives. The themes presented in my empirical chapters and conclusion are presented not as universal truths but as situated patterns of meaning that highlight the relational and uneven dynamics of algorithmic sense-making.

I approached data analysis with a commitment to feminist ethics of care, attentiveness and situated knowledge. I paid close attention to the emotional tone of participants' accounts, treating affective responses, such as frustration, hope or disappointment, as analytically meaningful, rather than dismissing them as irrational or irrelevant. I also remained alert to moments of silence, ambiguity or contradiction, recognising that these, too, reveal the complexities of participants' lived experiences. My feminist lens encouraged me to look for patterns of difference, not just similarity, and to consider how inequalities shaped how participants make sense of algorithms and the relationship this has with their social media practices. Throughout the analysis, I used a reflexive journal to document my evolving interpretations, moments of uncertainty, and my own emotional responses that arose during immersion in the data. This helped me to remain critically aware of how my own assumptions were shaping the analytical process.

4.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the epistemological and methodological foundations of my study, demonstrating how an interpretivist and constructivist orientation, informed by feminist principles, shaped all stages of the research. Through a reflexive and relational approach, I prioritised situated knowledges and the lived experiences of everyday women entrepreneurs, attending to the affective, intuitive, and narrative dimensions of how they make sense of social media algorithms and the relationship this has with their social media practices. My data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews, ongoing asynchronous communication, and limited online participant observation, were selected and adapted in line with these commitments, and were designed to capture the entanglements between practice, meaning-making, and platform conditions.

Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted, enabling a nuanced and iterative reading of the data that foregrounds interpretation, complexity, and variation. At every stage, I approached research as a meaning-making practice, embedded in power relations, shaped by my own positionality, and driven by a commitment to epistemic justice. This methodological approach provided the foundation for addressing my four research questions, and for developing the analytical framework presented in the following chapters.

In the following chapters, I turn to my analysis of the empirical data, presenting findings from interviews, ongoing correspondence, and limited participant observation to examine the algorithmic sense-making and social media practices of everyday women entrepreneurs.

Chapter Five: Algorithmic Vibes as Intuitive and Affective Orientations

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that the concept of *algorithmic vibes* serves as a useful theoretical model for understanding how everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of the fluctuating and opaque algorithms that govern their visibility on social media platforms. I focus specifically here on how algorithmic vibes are intuitive and affective, terms that I introduced in Chapter Three (Theoretical Framework) and revisit below. This addresses research question one, which asks how do everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms on a range of social media platforms? I also argue that the construction of algorithmic vibes is entangled with the social media practices of participants, as sense-making and practice happen concurrently with one informing the other, and vice versa. Viewing these interconnections through the lens of algorithmic vibes highlights the subtle ways participants register and respond to platform opacity and fluctuation in their everyday practice. In this way, I address research question two in this chapter, that is: What is the nature of the relationship between everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and their social media practices?

Drawing on Ahmed (2006), which I introduced in Chapter Three (Theoretical Framework), I use orientation to refer to the way individuals come to inhabit and move through spaces by leaning toward what feels familiar, promising, and/or, in the case of entrepreneurs, viable. In the context of social media platforms, where visibility is governed by opaque algorithms, orientation helps conceptualise how participants sense and make sense of what a platform seems to reward, and how they adapt their practices accordingly.

Orientation is closely connected to intuition, also introduced in Chapter Three, as intuition helps to explain how feeling, as well as speculation, contributes to the formation of orientations over time. I draw on Berlant's (2011) view of intuition as a

mode of affective sensing that helps individuals navigate uncertain, unstable, or contradictory conditions in everyday life. Building on Berlant's work, Pedwell (2024) describes intuition as involving the interplay of "the conscious and the nonconscious [...] the cognitive and the affective" (p. 191), offering a way of navigating complexity that goes beyond rational analysis. I argue that intuition was central to the way most participants made sense of algorithms, as they developed awareness and understanding based on past experiences, changes in the visibility of their content, and patterns they had observed over time, even if they could not fully explain why certain content seemed to succeed or fail. For many participants, the interview was the first time they had attempted to verbalise these reflections, illustrating how intuitive understanding develops through ongoing engagement and is often felt or sensed even before it is consciously articulated.

Pedwell (2024) argues that intuition involves the interplay of affect and cognition, as feelings actively contribute to how meaning is constructed in the midst of uncertainty. As I describe throughout this chapter, affective responses to platform visibility were central to many participants' algorithmic sense-making. In the context of algorithmic opacity, participants' sense-making was frequently accompanied by affective responses, including hesitation, humility and curiosity, particularly when participants found it difficult to explain the effects of algorithms on their platform visibility. Participants also described algorithms as unpredictable, which evoked feelings of frustration, uncertainty, surprise, and disappointment, particularly when previously successful content or strategies no longer appeared to generate organic reach. These affective responses often prompt, as well as inform, participants' algorithmic sense-making guiding how they interpret fluctuations in visibility.

In this chapter, I also employ Bourdieu's (1990) concept of practical mastery, which I introduced earlier in Chapter Three (Theoretical Framework). Practical mastery refers to a form of context-specific know-how acquired through repeated engagement within a particular field. In this case, the field refers to digital entrepreneurship within the platform economy. Practical mastery entails developing a 'feel for the game'. That is, a capacity to act effectively without relying on formal rules or explicit reasoning. Here, the 'game' refers to the pursuit of visibility on digital platforms, where algorithms govern visibility but their logics are opaque and subject

to change. A feel for the game develops through repetition, sensitivity to feedback, responsiveness to feedback, and sensitivity to the conditions of the field.

Although Bourdieu does not describe this responsiveness in terms of intuition, I expand the concept Berlant (2011) and Pedwell (2024), mentioned earlier in the chapter, to expand this understanding. I argue that participants' practical mastery was often grounded in an intuitive orientation toward platform logics, constructed through reflection on the prior success or failure of their practices, judged in terms of visibility and audience engagement, and affective responses to shifting visibility.

I draw on Bourdieu's concept in this chapter to emphasise that participants' intuitive orientations did not arise in isolation but were constructed through repeated, practical engagement with platform systems. In this context, practical mastery offers a way of understanding how participants developed a 'feel for the game', meaning a sensitivity to what seemed to be rewarded or discouraged by the algorithm, through trial, adjustment, and affective responsiveness. This complements my concept of algorithmic vibes by situating intuition within the structured and recursive practices of platform labour.

Although the focus of this chapter is on algorithmic vibes as affective and intuitive orientations to platform algorithms, important differences in how algorithmic vibes are constructed by different everyday women entrepreneurs emerge throughout the chapter. These differences are relevant to my third research question: What differences, if any, exist amongst different everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and social media practices? Whilst this chapter does not seek to fully explain the sources of these differences, it shows that participants' did not construct algorithmic vibes in uniform ways. Through the examples I present, it becomes clear that participants respond to and interpret algorithmic logics and platform conditions in varied ways, sometimes with curiosity or optimism, sometimes with caution or doubt. Differences in algorithmic sense-making and social media practice are highlighted throughout this chapter, providing a foundation for Chapter Seven, where I explore how algorithmic vibes are constructed as situated orientations, formed through the lived conditions of entrepreneurship and participants' differential positioning within the platform economy.

Finally, I argue broader platform structures and logics, including platform design, governance, and algorithmic opacity, contribute to the construction of algorithmic vibes, accounting for how platform structures and logics shape, enable and constrain entrepreneurial practice on social media platforms. These issues are the focus of my fourth research question, which is: What is the relationship between platform structures and logics and the algorithmic sense-making and social media practices of everyday women-entrepreneurs?

In order to address this research question, I utilise the conceptual tools outlined in Chapter Three, particularly the notion of affective atmospheres (Anderson 2009; Lupton 2017), technical and digital atmospheres (Ash 2013; Lupton 2017), and the structuring concepts of structures and infra-structures of feeling (Williams 1977; Coleman 2018). These concepts enable an examination of platform environments as affectively charged and temporally dynamic spaces. They draw attention to how emotions, feelings and affective forces are entangled with participants' algorithmic sense-making.

In what follows, I first explore how participants narrate their awareness and understanding of social media algorithms, often expressing uncertainty, partial understanding, and reflections marked by affective intensity. I then examine how algorithmic vibes are constructed through everyday practices of posting, observing, and adjusting, foregrounding the intuitive and ongoing nature of this sense-making. The next sections consider how participants navigate trial and error, including the practical mastery developed through repeated engagement, the experience of temporal instability, and moments of selective withdrawal from demanding platform practices. Finally, I turn to how participants attune to patterns and trends in the platform environment, constructing algorithmic vibes in relation to what appears to be rewarded, what feels viable, and how platform atmospheres are interpreted over time. Throughout, I highlight the ways in which algorithmic vibes are structured not only by individual practices, but also by platform governance, opacity, and broader economic conditions.

5.2 Framing Algorithms in the Interview Context

As detailed in Chapter 4, I collected qualitative data primarily through 28 semi-structured interviews with everyday women entrepreneurs, from a diverse range of backgrounds, all of whom are based in the UK. A small amount of data was collected via participant observation in a closed Facebook Group for women entrepreneurs. As the data collection period progressed, some participants provided additional information and insights, subsequent to being interviewed, via messenger services and/or email. With their consent, these communications have been included in the data analysis.

The interview schedule (Appendix 6) was divided into three sections: 1) Background Information, 2) Social Media Use and 3) Algorithms. Section One aimed to gather general background information about the participant's business, their professional background and entrepreneurial experience, and a basic idea of how they are using social media, mainly which platforms they use and why. Section Two went into more detail about their social media practices, asking participants about what they post and the steps they take to obtain visibility on social media platforms. In this section, I also asked questions about what success means to them and how they measure it. In the third and final section of the interview, I asked questions specifically about their awareness and understanding of social media algorithms. Although I did not ask direct questions about algorithms until the third section of the interviews, some participants brought up the subject earlier. When this occurred, it was usually not clear why; it may have been that they had a high level of awareness of algorithms, participants may have felt that it was an important topic of conversation, or it may have been because they were aware of the aims of the project.

At the beginning of Section Three of the interviews, I asked participants to answer the following question: "What is your understanding of the phrase social media algorithm?" Having received their answer, and reassuring them that I would not be judging their answer as "correct" or "incorrect", I provided a simple explanation of the term, reproduced below. Having captured a sense of how they understood the term 'social media algorithm', I felt it was important to read out loud a simple definition of the term before moving on to ask any more questions. This was to ensure

comprehension and that when I asked subsequent questions we had a shared, yet broad, understanding of the meaning of algorithms to discuss. The explanation of 'social media algorithms' I read aloud was as follows:

"Algorithms are used by social media platforms for a variety of purposes, including recommending content and people to follow and deciding who to show your posts to. However, social media platforms tell us very little about how their algorithms work.

We do know that algorithms take into account lots of different factors to decide which posts to show to which users, but we don't know exactly what these factors are or how exactly algorithms work on different social media platforms."

I formulated this explanation, using what I considered to be participant-friendly language, based on the academic definitions of algorithms detailed in Chapter Two (Literature Review).

From a constructivist perspective, I recognise that meaning is co-produced within the interview setting (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), shaped by the relational dynamics between interviewer and participant, and the discursive context in which knowledge is produced. Offering an accessible definition of 'social media algorithm' was not intended to shape or restrict participants' responses, but rather to support a grounded and inclusive conversation in which participants could draw on their own experiences without feeling they needed specialist knowledge or technical literacy.

This was also an ethical consideration. Guided by feminist ethics of attentiveness and care, I viewed interviews as relational encounters in which trust, vulnerability, and mutual responsiveness were prioritised (Ellis 2007). My approach was also informed by principles of epistemic (in)justice (Fricker 2007; Code 1991; Harding 1987). Epistemic injustice refers to the unfair treatment individuals face in their capacity to contribute knowledge or be recognised as credible knowers. Fricker (2007) distinguishes between two forms: testimonial injustice, which occurs when a

speaker's words are given a "deflated level of credibility" (p. 2), and hermeneutical injustice, which is when the concepts or language available within a society are insufficient for certain individuals or groups to make full sense of their own experiences, particularly experiences that are marginalised or under-recognised. Based on these principles, I sought to avoid reproducing hierarchies of knowledge that privilege technical or expert understandings of algorithms over lived, affective or intuitive forms of sense-making. Instead, I aimed to create a conversational space in which awareness, uncertainty, and embodied forms of understanding were recognised as valid and analytically meaningful.

For example, when I asked Rachel, a Property Portfolio Builder who helps people invest in property and assists them with renovations and property letting, what her understanding of the term social media algorithm was, she began with, "I feel like I know what it means, but...", then stopped mid-sentence. I responded by reassuring her, "There's no right or wrong answer here. I'm not testing you." This helped ease her concern and opened space for her to continue sharing her ideas:

"So it's like a test. So basically, what I think it is, is like how LinkedIn or whatever platform you use decides...what order to show your posts and who to show it to. So it's almost like a computer in the background that will say...this post holds more weight and more value to this person. And this one's not as important. And then I think the more...you post...say if you've got one that a lot of people who've seen it have interacted, then it'll show it to more people."

Rachel concluded by asking, "That's my understanding. Is that right?" My response was intentionally affirming: "Yeah, I would say so. That sums up a lot of it. I'll read out a simple explanation as well, just so we're on the same page, but you've covered a lot of what I'm going to say." This moment was not just about reassurance, but reflective of a broader commitment to treating participants' narratives, including hesitation, doubt or intuition, as meaningful and worthy of analysis. Rather than treating algorithmic knowledge as something to be objectively measured, I was interested in how participants narrate their understanding in relation to their lived

experience, even, or especially, when that understanding is uncertain, affective or difficult to articulate.

Some of the uncertainty expressed in answers to this question could be interpreted as indicative of a sense of epistemic vulnerability (Johnson 2023). By this term, I mean a feeling of being asked to speak about something that participants sensed was important but also difficult to articulate. For example, Nadia, a Private Tutor to school-aged children, said: “Is it to do with like... [hesitation]... oh I won't explain very well”. Michelle, a Sports Massage Therapist, described her understanding of algorithms as “not great” and “quite basic”. As Bourdieu (1990) argues, individuals' habitus and prior experiences shape what they recognise as legitimate knowledge, and by extension, what they feel authorised or confident to speak about. From this perspective, expressions of “not knowing” can be read as a form of positioned uncertainty, rather than a lack of knowledge. This positioned uncertainty is shaped both by the opacity of algorithms and by broader social norms about expertise, legitimacy and confidence, which are unevenly distributed and often gendered (Thomas-Hunt and Phillips 2004).

5.3 Algorithmic Vibes as Affective and Intuitive: Hesitation, Humility and Curiosity

Participants frequently described algorithms as “in the background” or “something hidden”, referring to elusive systems that quietly govern what is seen, who sees it, and how content moves through platforms. In this way, they demonstrated awareness of the complexity and opacity, or ‘black box’ quality, of algorithms (Pasquale 2015). As Alice, a Happiness Consultant, expressed: “nobody really knows the rules on social media, it's all, you know, the whole algorithm stuff is a bit of a mystery.” Alice works with employers to promote happiness and wellbeing in workplaces, primarily through talks, workshops, away days, lunch and learn sessions. She referred to “the mechanics in the background,” while Claire, a Business Coach for women entrepreneurs, described it as “the computer-y bit that decides.” Others, like Phoebe and Sophie, used similar phrases - “something in the background,” or “a method in the background” - to gesture toward the algorithm's felt

presence, even in the absence of concrete knowledge. These descriptions suggest that participants experienced algorithms not as systems to be known, but as ambient forces to be navigated.

Phoebe is an Astrologer who helps people learn about lunar cycles and use this to support their personal growth and development. Her elaboration on her response also points to the affective power of algorithms, which become a source of frustration due to their opacity: “It's one of those that's really frustrating because we know the algorithm exists, we don't really know much about it. It's like a unicorn, isn't it?” It is in response to this sense of backgrounded power that algorithmic vibes are constructed. Participants do not necessarily claim to know how the algorithm works, but they feel its effects and offer speculative responses when asked what algorithms are and how they affect their visibility on social media platforms.

Although every participant offered an answer to the question “What is your understanding of the phrase social media algorithm?”, many prefaced their responses with hesitation or qualified their answers as unsure, incomplete, or “probably wrong”. Some stopped mid-sentence, while others explicitly asked whether their understanding was correct, revealing a perceived need to justify or apologise for their lack of technical knowledge. Despite prefacing or tempering their answers with indications of uncertainty, all participants were able to provide an answer that demonstrated some awareness and understanding of social media algorithms. For example, Farrah, a Perfume Retailer, began her answer with “No clue”, but nevertheless offered an explanation of social media algorithms, saying:

“Algorithm... it's sort of, it's in the background, when you add a post onto Instagram or any social media it will sort of see it and think okay I think this person should see it and it will go on to theirs. And if those people have liked or commented or even stayed there for like three or four seconds then they'll keep on sharing my algorithm. And the more people that like it or comment or whatever - engage - then they will increase that amount of people....that's my understanding.”

Other participants engaged in similar moments of tentative reflection. Fran, a Business and Personal Development Coach, articulated:

“I guess for me I see it as sort of how they measure it. Sort of what's effective, or not effective. Are you doing things right. Are you doing things wrong.... Are you giving the platform what it needs to boost your profile up the algorithms and up the scale kind of thing. I don't know if that's right or wrong really.”

These moments of uncertainty do not signify disengagement or a lack of insight. On the contrary, these expressions of uncertainty reflect what Oman (2021) describes as an understanding that exists on a scale between knowing and feeling. Fran is not offering a coherent theory of how algorithms work, but nor is she disengaged. Instead, she is thinking aloud in a space of ambiguity, drawing on felt impressions of how the platform responds to her content. Her sense-making reflects an affective orientation, as feelings of uncertainty and curiosity contribute to her construction of algorithmic vibes. Fran responded to my definition of algorithms not with a theory of her own, but with a pause and the comment, “It’s really interesting isn’t it?” Her question - “So, what is it?”. This reflects a desire to understand, but also an openness to not knowing. Rather than disengagement, this moment reveals an affective response to platform ambiguity, shaped by our exchange in the interview context. Here, algorithmic vibes are felt and explored through conversation, rather than being narrated as clear or definitive theories.

As our conversation unfolded, she began to speculate aloud about how algorithms might limit reach, noting that:

“In your mind you kind of think it's going to all your connections but actually it's probably only going to a fraction of them [...] that's really interesting, isn't it? So I wonder how they choose who they select that you see their posts and who sees yours.”

Her comments were marked by hesitation, curiosity, and emerging insight. This was not a fully formed theory of algorithmic operations, but rather a felt sense of how

visibility works. It was a moment in which algorithmic vibes were constructed through partial, in-the-moment reflection.

This moment of reflection led Fran to consider the implications of algorithmic filtering more directly. As she put it:

“So what can you do...if LinkedIn is sending you to all these connections that are in pot A, but you want to reach the ones in pot B, it’s knowing what you’ve got to do in order to divert those algorithms, isn’t it?”

Her metaphor of “pot A” and “pot B” signals her perception that segmentation happens within the platform, a sense that algorithms channel visibility in particular directions, potentially limiting reach. While she does not claim to know how this happens, Fran’s phrasing reveals an intuitive grasp of algorithmic logics as both structured and contingent; there is a system at work, but it may be pliable, and open to redirection.

The phrase “divert those algorithms” is particularly revealing. It suggests that the algorithm is imagined as an active, directional force that must be gently rerouted, nudged, or engaged with tactically. This language reflects a subtle but meaningful shift. Fran moves from wondering how the algorithm works to asking how one might work with or against it. In this sense, Fran’s reflection illustrates how algorithmic vibes can form through speculative pragmatism: a way of feeling out one’s position in the platform landscape and imagining what kinds of actions might produce greater visibility. This illustrates how the imagined and the practical are inextricably intertwined. When Fran wonders how to “divert those algorithms” she is linking speculation to an imagined set of actions, shaped by her past experiences and ongoing practices. This illustrates a key aspect of algorithmic vibes: they are not just speculative orientations or imaginative guesses, but are affectively felt and practically enacted.

Despite feelings of uncertainty, all participants were aware that algorithms operate on social media platforms and that these systems have at least some influence on the visibility of their content. For most participants, this kind of awareness and

understanding of algorithms did not emerge from technical knowledge or explicit theorising, but from their everyday practices of posting on social media platforms and their intuitive reflections on those practices. Their practices developed over time, often without being consciously planned or theorised. Understanding developed gradually through repetition, experimentation, and responsiveness to what seemed to work.

To explore these forms of intuitive sense-making more directly, I followed my question about the general definition of social media algorithms with the question: “In what ways do you think the algorithms on [platform] affect the visibility of your posts?” This question was designed to shift attention from the algorithm as an abstract concept to participants’ lived experiences and practices. For participants who had initially framed their understanding in terms of their experiences as consumers of content on social media, this question encouraged reflection on their role as content creators who are navigating what Bucher (2018) describes as the ‘threat of invisibility’. It was often in these reflections that intuitive, practice-based understandings of what algorithms do surfaced, not always fully formed, but rich with insight into how participants feel, sense, and respond to algorithmic conditions.

For example, Dance Teacher Elizabeth expressed some awareness of social media algorithms, but when I asked her directly how she thought algorithms affected the visibility of her posts, her response was hesitant and uncertain. She explained that she had not spent much time reflecting on how algorithms work or what effects they might have. However, this is not to say she was disengaged from algorithmic sense-making; as I go on to discuss, her practices reveal an affective and intuitive orientation to platform dynamics. Elizabeth told me: “It’s not something that I’ve majorly thought about, probably the first time I’m having a proper...think about it.”

The interview question appeared to prompt a train of thought, as Elizabeth began speculating aloud about why her content might not be reaching people under the age of 40 on Facebook.

“A lot of it will be down to the algorithm...I guess maybe now I’m thinking about it...I’m assuming that my...posts and my page is recommended to

people...of a similar background...I guess it's limiting in that sense...If we're going on the theory that the algorithm focuses on who's currently engaging with your posts."

Although not reaching users under the age of 40 was a long-standing concern for Elizabeth, she had not previously tried to make sense of it in explicit terms. Her reflections emerged in response to the interview question and were tentative and grounded in her everyday social media practices. Elizabeth's hesitation, conditional phrasing, and repetition is not analysed here in terms of discourse, but as evidence of her effort to reflect on her experience in the moment (Braun & Clarke 2021). These reflections suggest that algorithmic vibes are not always consciously theorised or discursively developed, but surface through partial, intuitive efforts to explain what has been sensed or enacted. In this sense, the interview becomes a space in which algorithmic sense-making, grounded in practice, begins to take shape in language, making visible what was previously only sensed.

Given what Elizabeth says about not having thought before about algorithms, it seems that she does not consciously engage with algorithms or platform logics. However, it was clear that she takes an active and strategic approach to using social media, which is at least somewhat informed by what she understands to be the rules and norms of the platforms she uses, particularly Facebook and Instagram. For example, Elizabeth regularly promotes her dance classes in local Facebook Groups, but does so cautiously. She carefully places posts across different groups and avoids posting too frequently because she is concerned that too many posts would be seen, by both users and algorithms, as spam. This reflects how fear of platform sanctions, such as reduced reach or account restrictions, shape platform practices even in the absence of clear rules. As Cotter (2019) observes in her study of influencers, "fears of sanctions have material impacts on influencers' strategies" (p. 904), prompting users to pre-emptively regulate their practices in line with what they believe the platform might reward or penalise. This also relates to Petre, Duffy and Hund's (2019) discussion of platform paternalism, as they argue that users may choose not to carry out certain actions for fear of punishment, whilst other actions may be seen as desirable based on the premise that they may be rewarded by algorithm with platform visibility.

Elizabeth's concern was twofold; that excessive posting might irritate group members, and that "the Facebook algorithm" would identify her activity as spam and limit her reach. As she explained, "you want to kind of be able to stay in the group and keep popping up now and then." Although Meta's (Facebook's Parent Company) official Spam Policy mentions that restrictions may be placed on accounts that post in Facebook Groups at high frequencies, it does not define what constitutes "high frequency," nor does it specify how restrictions are enforced (Meta 2024). Instead, the guidance published in the Facebook Help Centre places the onus on Group Administrators to manage spam in their Facebook Groups (Meta 2025). In the absence of clear and comprehensive guidance from the platform, Elizabeth described it as helpful when Group Administrators imposed clear rules, such as the timing or frequency of promotional posts. Elizabeth told me:

"A lot of these groups...do have certain rules in place about how many times businesses can advertise. So I guess, knowing that, gives me that sense of people don't want to be seeing adverts all the time."

In the absence of clear information about platform governance, Elizabeth relied on implicit cues and group rules to guide her practices. This highlights the relational dimensions of algorithmic vibes, since her sense-making was not oriented solely toward the algorithm itself, but also toward the broader social environment of the platform, including the rules imposed by group administrators and the imagined responses of group members. In this way, Elizabeth's practice reflects an ongoing negotiation of platform logics, community norms, and her own entrepreneurial goals.

Drawing on the many years of experience she had using social media for business, Elizabeth described how she no longer followed rigid rules, but instead "relax[ed] into it and you just get a vibe and a sense of what's going on." Elizabeth's algorithmic sense-making reflects an orientation that has developed gradually, through long-term platform use, and through sensitivity to social and technical cues. Her case illustrates how algorithmic vibes are constructed over time in response to both algorithmic opacity and everyday platform practice. Elizabeth's selective posting in Facebook Groups reflects a form of intuitive sense-making based on her awareness and understanding of social and platform norms, rather than direct knowledge of

explicit rules. This reflects what Bourdieu (1990) terms a *practical sense*, rooted in her positioning within the field of entrepreneurship.

5.5 Trial, Error and the Work of Adjustment

5.5.1 Practical Mastery and Developing a ‘Feel for the Game’

In the absence of clear or reliable information about how social media algorithms operate, many participants described an ongoing process of trial and error. Their sense-making involved repeated engagement with platform systems, such as posting content, observing metrics, and adjusting their strategies, guided by a developing sense of what seemed to work. Here I draw on Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of practical mastery, which I introduced in Chapter Three (Theoretical Framework, to emphasise that participants’ intuitive orientations did not arise in isolation but were constructed through repeated, practical engagement with platform systems. Hence, I argue that algorithmic vibes are constructed through this form of practical mastery, as participants develop intuitive, affective orientations to algorithmic visibility over time.

Participants did not claim to fully understand how visibility was distributed, but they developed what Bourdieu (1990) might describe as a kind of practical mastery. As Farrah, a Perfume Retailer, put it:

“I’ll try these things out but then I don’t know how the algorithm is gonna work. I don’t understand at all. It’s trial and error. It’s very much trial and error for me. It’s not like I know.”

Over time, participants had developed an awareness of patterns in platform behaviour and subtle cues about what content “seemed to work.” This sense-making was often felt before it was articulated. This is consistent with Coleman’s (2018) argument that digital platforms generate a continuous affective present, in which users become attuned to ongoing rhythms, signals, and fluctuations, even when they cannot fully explain what they are responding to.

Diane, a Costume Maker who makes custom dancewear and costumes for children, described how she had experimented with using her personal Facebook Profile to post in groups, rather than posting from her Business Page, in order to develop a feel for which practice would be rewarded with the most visibility:

“It’s kind of trying to figure out what the group’s kind of algorithms are...what makes it most relevant in that group? Why is Facebook showing that more than others?...I found sometimes if I do it [post] as my personal page and add the photos on my personal page...and then just tag my business rather than directly sharing the business post, sometimes it will then go further. So it must be that it thinks that’s more relevant to the group, and so it’s putting it higher up than the shared post.”

Diane does not offer an explicit or unified theory of how Facebook’s algorithms work, but instead articulates a felt awareness of patterned outcomes in how visibility is distributed. She begins to formulate a working explanation: that posts made from a personal profile and tagged with a business account are seen as “more relevant” than those shared directly from a business page and, therefore, achieve greater visibility. This becomes a basis for practical mastery, as she adapts her posting strategy to align with what she senses the platform might reward. Diane’s approach illustrates how algorithmic vibes are constructed through observation and experimentation, as entrepreneurs learn to feel their way through opaque systems, even without being able to explain them.

Other participant accounts were indicative of how practical mastery develops over time, as they gain experience, gather more information and continue to experiment. Melissa, an Embroiderer, explained:

“Being in business for long enough you kind of use that information that you’ve gathered over the years... it’s just that whole process of trial and error and patience.”

Melissa customises workwear, and sometimes clothing for other purposes, using embroidery. Although this current business was relatively new at the time of our

interview, she has been in business for many years. Her previous businesses include a remote admin service and a craft business. Her algorithmic sense-making is grounded in repetition and gradual refinement. She does not claim to understand how platforms work, but describes drawing on accumulated snippets of advice and observation, and testing what might still work over time. For example, after initially using TikTok for personal browsing, Melissa began experimenting with a business account and recalled earlier advice about the importance of hashtags:

“I remember somebody I used to work with many years ago moaning at me about hashtags...and I was like really? Uh yeah, hashtags are stupidly important...especially on a platform like TikTok where it is so massive....you do need to be very specific where you want your videos to go.”

In this example, Melissa’s remembered conversation, once dismissed, is recalled and re-evaluated in light of her current experience on TikTok. She is building an understanding of how algorithms affect visibility by drawing on prior advice, accumulated fragments of knowledge, and memory, as well as reflecting on what seems to be working currently.

Although Farrah, Diane and Melissa engaged in different practices and forms of experimentation, they all described their approaches as ‘trial and error’, as did many other participants. What they have in common is that their intuitive orientations to algorithms, what I term algorithmic vibes, are constructed through the accumulated processes of practical mastery. Their accounts illuminate how repeated practice, reflection, and sensitivity to patterns of visibility contribute to an intuitive sense of what platforms reward. Rather than standing apart from the concept of algorithmic vibes, practical mastery helps to explain how intuitive orientations are built over time.

5.5.3 Temporal Instability and Variability of Outcomes

Michelle, the Sports Massage Therapist I introduced earlier, also described her approach to gaining platform visibility as ‘trial and error’, but her account highlights

how algorithmic vibes are not only constructed over time but have to be continuously re-constructed because visibility is unpredictable. She explained:

“To be honest it's trial and error and it changes all the time...one thing that works one week will not get shown to anybody the next week but we don't know why that is because, you know, Instagram doesn't care about us does it?”

Michelle reflects on a broader sense of instability that contributed to many participants' orientations to social media platforms. Rather than relying on one set of advice or a strategy they have been formulated through ‘trial and error’ over a period of time, Michelle feels it is necessary to continue adjusting her practices in response to constantly evolving platform logics. Her practices are reactive, and shaped by shifting impressions of what the algorithm *might* favour. Algorithmic vibes, therefore, are never complete nor stable. Instead, they are about continuing to feel one's way through an opaque and unstable system, adapting not only to what the platform appears to reward, but also to how it feels to try to stay visible within it.

For Michelle, filtering through advice about social media visibility was part of how she constructed algorithmic vibes. When talking about the challenges she faces on social media, Michelle explained how it was difficult to decide on which practices to engage with because there are lots of people offering conflicting advice:

“I guess it's just kind of understanding that there's so many different opinions on how to use it and just find something that works for you...Trying to kind of filter through all of the approaches that people have. Which are probably all valid but they just work for different people, in different industries at different times.”

Michelle's comments reflect an awareness that visibility is not experienced evenly across users, businesses or time. She finds it necessary to “cherry pick” what advice or strategies feel relevant or useful to her, specifically, at any given time. This complicates the ‘trial and error’ approach because it is always necessary to reflect, evaluate and adapt practices. Participants like Michelle had a sense of the variability

of outcomes, or the experience of doing the same thing and receiving different, often inexplicable results. As a result, Michelle felt that sometimes she would get “too consumed in it”, referring to the trial and error approach, and would opt instead to “just post things that you want to post”.

This speaks to the temporal instability that characterises platform participation. In other words, what works is provisional, shaped by the fluctuating logics of algorithmic visibility, and by the shifting atmosphere of the platform. Phoebe, the Astrologer I introduced earlier, described this as “seasonality” and suggested that there are times when she has to work harder than others to be visible on social media:

“There’s definitely a seasonality to it, I think, as well. There’s times where it’s quieter, where I’m definitely just naturally getting much more attention on my page and then other times where it’s not.”

These responses highlight both the variability of algorithmic outcomes and the deeper temporal instability of platform life, two related but distinct dynamics that contributed to many participants’ sense-making. Entrepreneurs are orienting themselves within a constantly shifting present, where relevance, visibility and success are always in motion. This distinction, between the variability of algorithmic outcomes and temporal instability of platforms, helps to illuminate the broader conditions in which algorithmic sense-making unfolds. This resonates with Coleman’s (2018) concept of infrastructures of feeling, particularly her notion of a “present temporality” shaped by immediacy and flux. Coleman uses this term to describe how digital platforms cultivate an affective orientation toward the present moment, compelling users to respond continuously to changing signals, notifications, and platform cues. This temporality generates a mode of engagement that is open-ended, provisional, and attentive to what feels immediate or relevant.

For a number of participants, the ongoing labour of adaptation, including filtering advice, trialling strategies, and staying attuned to shifting platform demands was felt to be intensified when using multiple social media platforms, each with their own opaque and ever-changing logic. As Phoebe explained:

“I can’t do the same thing on Instagram and Facebook and get the same results, it’s completely different, and I think that’s why it’s hard to be on more than one platform... I can’t get my brain around it. It’s too much like hard work. I don’t want to rewrite it [content] multiple times.”

Using multiple social media platforms to promote their business was common amongst participants, and Phoebe’s account highlights how this can multiply the demands of algorithmic sense-making, often without a clear sense of return. Her frustration - “I can’t get my brain around it” - points to a recurring feature of the platform economy. That is, the demand to constantly adapt content for multiple algorithmically governed platforms, each with their own shifting logics and affordances. Rather than allowing for a streamlined or unified approach, the multiplicity of platforms compounds the labour of algorithmic sense-making, reinforcing conditions of temporal instability and intensifying the need for continual trial and error. This resonates with Scolere et al.’s (2018) observation that professional content creators (distinct from the everyday entrepreneurs in my study) often develop platform-specific practices, shaped by each platform’s affordances, their imagined audiences, and their efforts to maintain a coherent identity.

Michelle similarly described the overwhelming nature of continual algorithmic sense-making, particularly the pressure to absorb and apply the abundance of competing advice. “If you tried to do everything,” she reflected, “you’d never post anything.” Her statement points to a wider tension in participants’ accounts, between the imperative to remain constantly visible and optimised, and the emotional, mental, and practical limits of sustaining such effort. In this context, doing less or acting selectively was not simply a question of efficiency, but a form of self-preservation. It functioned as a conscious orientation toward sustainability, a resistance to burnout, and a refusal of the always-on hustle that platform culture often demands (Chairunnisah and Kurnia 2023). The concept of algorithmic vibes highlights how platforms generate technical, temporal, and affective pressures that shape women’s everyday experiences of entrepreneurial labour and their efforts to remain visible online.

The following section examines these tensions in more depth, focusing on how participants negotiated the limits of visibility and the constraints of time, energy, and care.

5.5.4 Selective Withdrawal

The tension between temporal instability and algorithmic sense-making was particularly apparent in an account that Alice, the Happiness Consultant I introduced earlier in this chapter, shared of a sudden and unexplained drop in her organic reach on Instagram. Alice described how her visibility had “fallen through the floor”, from approximately 3,000 views per Reel to fewer than 200. This unexpected rupture unsettled her expectations and marked a clear break from what she had previously understood about how the platform rewarded content. Around the same time that Alice observed a sudden decrease in the visibility of her Reels, she also noticed that Instagram Stories seemed to be receiving greater visibility:

“I get a lot more exposure on my stories...I get the impression that fewer people are seeing my [grid] posts on Instagram. So I definitely think there's a preference with Instagram around sort of stories...that sort of transient, ephemeral content I definitely feel is favoured by the Instagram algorithms.”

Coupled with the sudden changes in organic reach, Alice expressed surprise and confusion that “actually it [her Instagram content] wasn't converting into anything [referring to enquiries and sales], or not nothing that I could figure out anyway.” This prompted her to reflect on what might have caused the change in her platform visibility and engagement with her content. She speculated this might be indicative of a change in the platform's algorithmic logics: “I think you know maybe...that's something that's changed with the algorithms.” In this moment, Alice's orientation to the platform no longer aligned with what the platform appeared to reward, prompting a sense of disconnection and uncertainty.

This disruption unsettled what had previously been a reliable orientation, referring to Alice's felt sense of what the platform rewarded and how visibility could be sustained.

In Ahmed's (2006) terms, orientation is about how we come to inhabit space by leaning toward what feels promising or familiar. When those conditions shift, as Alice experienced, one's orientation no longer holds, prompting a need to re-attune. Alice could not pinpoint what had gone wrong through metrics or performance data, but she knew that conditions of visibility on the platform felt different. This feeling that something was off, without a clear explanation became a cue to reorientate, altering her construction of algorithmic vibes.

Instead of doubling down on experimentation, Alice recalibrated. She stopped posting Reels altogether, concluding that she could no longer "be bothered with that effort for that return." This choice illustrates how algorithmic vibes inform what participants opt not to do, as well as what practices they choose to pursue. Alice's selective withdrawal reflects a strategic decision to stop engaging in practices that no longer seemed viable or rewarding. Despite her initial investment in Reels, she no longer perceived them as delivering sufficient visibility or leading to sales. Her selective withdrawal was a strategic adjustment in response to what she understood the platform to be rewarding with visibility. Like Michelle, Alice's account illustrates how algorithmic vibes are constructed through ongoing evaluation. These participants remained attuned to what appears to be working, but are prepared to abandon practices that no longer align with their business objectives.

Other participants, however, felt more conflicted about resisting the demands of platforms, conveying a sense of obligation to remain visible and optimised at all times. This could be seen as a perceived requirement for what Lupinacci (2021) refers to as 'compulsory continuous connectedness', or the way social media platforms create an environment in which users feel they must always stay connected. Over the course of many months, Astrologer Phoebe expressed to me her frustration with the unpredictability of social media, which she feels demands constant work to remain visible but generates unpredictable results. She described social media as an unreliable way to attract clients and generate revenue, but felt obliged to participate in order to maintain her business. She often mused over whether she could disengage from social media entirely, expressing to me: "If money didn't matter, would I be on social media?...perhaps, but not in the way I am right now".

Phoebe's experience illustrates a recurring tension in the conflicted feelings that surfaced when participants' platform practices were tied to the need to generate income. While she appreciated the relational and community-building aspects of social media, Phoebe expressed growing frustration at what she perceived as penalisation by the algorithm when she attempted to sell a product. This frustration stemmed from an observed pattern: content that was personal, entertaining, or informative seemed to be rewarded with visibility, whereas posts with explicit commercial intent appeared to be suppressed. Phoebe described that it was more difficult to achieve visibility on Facebook when she openly promoted paid services, compared to the engagement she received when sharing informal or non-commercial posts. The feeling that commercial content is deprioritised was echoed by many participants, who sensed that Facebook's algorithms worked to keep users on the platform and force businesses to pay for advertising, and therefore actively suppress commercial posts that are not paid-for advertisements.

This theory, that promotional content was being actively suppressed by platforms, was constructed through participants' repeated observations that posts promoting products often received lower reach or reduced engagement. These experiences led many to conclude that Facebook deprioritises promotional content in its algorithmic sorting. Similarly, several participants believed that Facebook limited the organic reach of posts containing external links, that is, links directing users to websites outside the platform. This was commonly interpreted by participants as a sign that content with external links was deprioritised in favour of keeping users within the platform environment.

Following one particularly disappointing campaign, Phoebe sent me a message:

"I've had a FB [Facebook] tantrum and am stepping back from wasting my time scheduling organic promotions as I honestly feel as though FB just turned off my impressions as soon as I started talking about what I had for sale."

This moment encapsulates the affective dissonance many participants described; a sense of being constrained by the platform's commercial logic, even as they relied on it to support their own. In this way, participants had affective responses to

platform feedback, a term which I use to refer to the range of implicit and explicit signals that users receive from social media platforms about how their content is performing, such as reach, likes and comments.

Phoebe was actively engaged in algorithmic sense-making, continually testing ways to outmanoeuvre what she felt was the platform's resistance to commercial content. However, despite investing significant time and energy into creating content and attempting to optimise her posts in various ways, she was unable to identify a reliable or replicable method for making her promotional offers visible. This ongoing labour of adjustment, which yielded few tangible results, left Phoebe feeling increasingly frustrated and disillusioned. Her description of having a "Facebook tantrum" and her decision to "step back" from organic promotions reflects a moment of affective rupture, where the implicit expectations she had formed about how the platform would respond to her efforts no longer held. Yet this withdrawal was not final or clear-cut. Phoebe's relationship with Facebook, and social media more broadly, remained in flux. After stepping away from Facebook, she redirected her attention to Instagram, only to later return to Facebook when Instagram's dynamics began to feel similarly opaque and unsatisfying. Her experiences demonstrate the recursive and ambivalent nature of algorithmic sense-making. For Phoebe, it was a cycle of experimentation, affective responses to platform feedback, withdrawal, and reluctant return. Thus, algorithmic vibes were constructed through a recursive and affectively charged process, in which felt experiences of instability, visibility, and perceived value over time were key.

5.6. Interpreting Patterns and Sensing Change in Platform Atmospheres

In the previous section, I explored how participants navigated algorithmic opacity through practices of trial and error, practical experimentation, and affective responsiveness to platform feedback. These reflections highlighted the fluctuating logics of algorithmic visibility, the variability of outcomes, and the practical and affective labour involved in staying attuned to what platforms seem to reward. In this section, I build on those insights by examining how participants oriented themselves

by looking outward and observing the actions and apparent successes of others on social media.

Many participants developed orientations by paying close attention to patterns, trends, and other users' practices as a way of gauging what a platform's algorithms might favour. This was framed by participants as inspiration. It was a way of drawing from the broader platform environment while adapting seemingly successful practices to their own goals, values, and audience. For example, Summer, a Reiki Master Practitioner, described how she regularly observed other users' activities on social media, looking for trends that could help her formulate a "blueprint" to guide her practices:

"Look at how other people are using it and what's working for them, and fit your content and your message and your personality...around that...how you can do something similar, not copy that, but maybe use that as a bit of a model...and a little bit of a blueprint."

She explained that her aim was not to copy other users, but to identify what types of content were gaining visibility and popularity and then use this insight to help inform her practices. This suggests that she was looking for a way of aligning with a platform's current atmosphere whilst maintaining individuality. As discussed in Chapter Three (Theoretical Framework), Lupton (2017) describes digital atmospheres as affective and ambient conditions that are sensed rather than consciously known. Consistent with digital atmospheres, Summer is sensing currents of visibility, mood, and momentum that shape what seems to be working on social media platforms. Her algorithmic vibes, therefore, are constructed by social observation and atmospheric cues, as well as how she perceives her own content to be performing based on platform feedback. She then makes anticipatory adjustments to her practices in response to what the platform appears to reward.

While Summer described observing others to develop a "blueprint" for what might be effective, other participants were more cautious or selective in how they responded to platform trends. For example, Hulwi, who provides one-to-one coaching to Muslim women who are stressed, was attuned to the shifting logics of visibility, such as the

apparent success of Reels, fast-paced editing, and trending audio, but she resisted the idea that these signals could be reduced to a formula.

“For me it’s like $1+1=2$. That’s it, we’re done... But the people who are doing well on Instagram... they’re actually very different people and different styles as well.”

Her reflections emphasise that there is no single “right” way to be visible, even when the platform atmosphere seems to suggest otherwise. Hulwi observed and tested trends, but also described her orientation as more art than science. She explained that some tactics are effective for some users only because they already have a following, or because the labour they require - “10 hours of editing, re-videoing and god knows...” - is not viable or desirable. In doing so, she revealed a key feature of algorithmic vibes; that they are constructed in relation to the pressures of platform labour alongside participants’ capacity and willingness to act.

Hulwi also explained that because her business depends on one-to-one client relationships, projecting an inauthentic version of herself online could undermine trust and compatibility:

“If I’m trying to pretend I’m someone I’m not, I may be pushing away clients that I would actually work really well with.”

For her, responding to the platform’s atmosphere could not come at the expense of authenticity. Thus, constructing algorithmic vibes involves negotiating tensions between platform atmosphere, personal capacity, and professional identity, as well as orientating oneself to platform logics.

Whilst Hulwi and Summer’s accounts illustrate how some participants orient themselves through broad patterns and observed trends, others described more focused approaches. This involved orientating themselves towards specific features of platform culture, such as trending audio or visual styles. Kimberley, the founder of a Murder Mystery Game business and Creator of True Crime content, offers a particularly rich example of this. Kimberley pays close attention to what is “trending”

on TikTok and Instagram, especially in relation to audio. This has become a key part of her practice, as she explains:

“Part of my strategy on Instagram is that every week I do a trend on there because it's the best for audience growth and I see much more views on them than I do on, say, an intro video to my next YouTube.”

Kimberley identifies what is currently popular, and also tries to anticipate what might trend next, as she explained:

“It's trying to find ones that are just before they trend...Because that helps with the visibility, if you're one of the first rather than jumping on the bandwagon after it's picked up some steam.”

Her comments suggest a form of affective anticipation, in which she orients herself toward what platform algorithms might value before it becomes widely visible; a practice that is both strategic and attuned to subtle shifts in platform atmosphere.

Kimberley's construction of algorithmic vibes is based on guidance offered by the platforms themselves, as well her personal observation and felt sense of the platform's atmosphere. For example, she referred to Adam Mosseri, Head of Instagram, who publicly stated that the platform was favouring video content over static posts: “so I move more to video to sort of satisfy what they had declared the algorithm change to be.” She had accessed resources in the ‘TikTok Academy’ - TikTok's official online website with learning resources for marketers and agencies. She also pays attention to advice shared by social media professionals online, and engages in experimentation through a ‘trial and error’ approach. This demonstrates how the construction of algorithmic vibes can involve a complex and ongoing negotiation that takes into account felt impressions, visible patterns, and platform-driven advice.

Alongside her attention to platform trends and guidance, Kimberley also described a relational and audience-driven orientation to algorithmic logics. She expressed confidence that if her content was “interesting and presented well,” it would

organically find an audience. As she put it, “the people who enjoy it will see it, because they will interact with it again and again.” Kimberley’s reflections highlight a belief that sustained audience engagement, rather than merely following platform trends, plays a crucial role in maintaining visibility. This is similar to Cotter’s (2019) finding that Instagram influencers who focus on generating visibility through relationship building on Instagram “emphasise creating ‘good’ original content that will resonate with other users” (p. 905). Similarly, Kimberley noted that:

“So I think that helps me because the algorithm is recognising that these people do like my stuff and therefore it's helping me by presenting it to them again and again, because I'm assuming that that's what's happened and they aren't searching me out.”

This suggests that her construction of algorithmic vibes is also informed by her awareness of audience practices and anticipation of current and future trends that may be highly visible on social media platforms. In this way, Kimberley’s orientation to platform algorithms blends strategic responsiveness to platform trends with an intuitive belief in the power of genuine audience interaction to sustain visibility.

Although Kimberley creates short-form video content for both Instagram and TikTok, she expressed a clear preference for Instagram. This preference was tied to the different atmospheres she associated with each platform. On Instagram, she perceived less pressure around posting frequency: “*maybe*” three times a week, compared to TikTok’s recommendation or expectation (she used both words alternately) of posting one to three times a day. Research by Arriagada and Ibáñez (2020) highlights that professional content creators experience pressure to post frequently in order to maintain visibility, with multiple posts a day often framed as necessary for remaining algorithmically relevant. They argue that platform affordances and the economic logic of visibility produce a temporal acceleration, compelling users to stay “always on” through constant content production. Kimberley’s reflections support Arriagada and Ibáñez (2020) findings, as she described how TikTok’s expectation of posts one to three times per day felt markedly more pressured and ephemeral compared to Instagram’s relatively slower rhythms.

She also reflected on differences in how time and visibility felt across the two platforms. On Instagram, she felt that content had a longer ‘afterlife’, explaining that:

“Reels have long lives, so you can stick it up and you can get picked up a couple of weeks after it's been up. Whereas TikTok, it's kind of a flash in a pan. Once the content's out there, it's gone.”

These reflections suggest that Kimberley experienced Instagram as offering a more durable temporality, where content could continue to circulate and attract engagement beyond the moment of posting. In contrast, TikTok demanded constant, high-frequency production to remain visible. This difference in temporal atmosphere shaped Kimberley’s orientation toward the platforms. Instagram’s slower rhythm made it feel more viable for sustaining an entrepreneurial presence over time, whereas TikTok’s fleeting circulation patterns intensified feelings of urgency and disposability. Kimberley’s preference for Instagram was not only a strategic choice, but also an affective response to the different atmospheres of visibility and temporality that she perceived on each platform.

The different temporalities Kimberley sensed across platforms also shaped her experiences of relationality. On Instagram, the slower, more durable rhythms of content circulation felt more conducive to building ongoing relationships, whereas TikTok’s fleeting atmosphere made sustained connection feel elusive. “I think the algorithm [on Instagram] allows you to build a community more than on TikTok,” she explained, noting that “Instagram does sort of serve you the people that you interact with the most.” In contrast, TikTok felt more ephemeral and therefore she felt disconnected: “I think TikTok, it’s just short bursts of entertainment.” The lack of relational infrastructure on TikTok contributed to her preference for Instagram, where interactions felt more cumulative and meaningful. These reflections illustrate that for some participants, algorithmic vibes are not only about sensing what content styles are trending, but also about feeling the temporal and relational atmospheres of platforms, and deciding where they feel most able to sustain engagement and community.

Kimberley's reflections on platform rhythms and atmospheres were closely tied to the rhythms of her own entrepreneurial practice. She described how her approach to social media shifted depending on what "mode" she was in, whether launching a new product, building an audience, or maintaining engagement.

"It all depends on what I want to do at that phase. So at the moment, I'm just about to go into launch mode. So it'll be more targeted Reels around showing people around the new game... after that... I'll be back to building an audience...I'll be using more trends because I'll be trying to reach more people to bring them in."

Kimberley's reflections reveal that her response to platform atmospheres was situated within the shifting cycles of her entrepreneurial practice. She frames her practices as contingent on what she wants to achieve at a given point in time. Whether preparing for a launch or focusing on audience-building, Kimberley calibrates her use of trending content, targeted messaging, and visibility tactics in alignment with the changing goals of her business. This highlights how algorithmic vibes influence practices in different ways depending on where they are in their business cycle.

Kimberley's account illustrates how algorithmic vibes are often constructed through anticipation of what may be rewarded in the near future. Being in "launch mode," she was already planning to post more targeted Reels, links, and promotional content in order to support the release of a new product. Kimberley also had to balance what she needed to do for her business with what she expected the platform would reward. This sense of having to negotiate between business goals and algorithmic logics was a common tension for participants. As discussed earlier, participants like Phoebe expressed concern that overtly selling on platforms like Facebook would reduce their reach, which highlights that commercial intent could feel misaligned with what the platform "wanted." Kimberley's example illustrates how some participants manage this tension cyclically, alternating between phases of audience-building, engagement, and selling. These cycles were grounded in participants' intuitive sense of how platform conditions were shifting, including what types of content or practices seemed likely to be rewarded by platform algorithms at

different times. In this way, participants constructed algorithmic vibes through ongoing interpretation and reflection, informed by prior experiences and by the affective atmospheres of the platform, in terms of what it felt like the platform was currently valuing or deprioritising. In Kimberley's case, her planned approach was informed by a felt understanding of how the visibility of promotional content might be limited by algorithms during a product launch phase.

Kimberley's example illustrated how participants oriented themselves in relation to temporal atmospheres. In contrast, Melissa's reflections highlight the spatial atmospheres of platform environments, and the felt sense of scale and visibility within them. Earlier I introduced Melissa, the Embroider who told me "on a platform like TikTok where it is so massive...you do need to be very specific where you want your videos to go." Melissa does not explicitly articulate why the platform is massive or why it feels that way, but her comment suggests that she has intuitively developed a felt sense of the scale of TikTok.

Her remark that "you do need to be very specific where you want your videos to go" suggests an understanding that content does not circulate uniformly, but rather moves within particular niches or currents. At the very beginning of our interview, Melissa described having "fallen into a side of TikTok called BikeTok", highlighting how she had come to understand her own content as part of a distinct space within the platform. This unplanned entry into a specific space within the platform opened up new business opportunities for her and informed her ongoing algorithmic sense-making. Her language reflects a user vernacular that constructs TikTok as composed of multiple "sides", each with their own norms, audiences, and rhythms (Maddox and Gill 2023). Maddox and Gill describe "sides of TikTok" as a "platform vernacular created and adopted by users to describe their experiences engaging with algorithmically curated, similar types of content, as well as the subsequent collectives forming around them" (p. 2). They emphasise that the language of "sides" invokes place and spatial distinction. Similarly, Jones (2023) notes that "people often conceive of TikTok in spatial terms," and argues that spatial metaphors help users make sense of the platform's overwhelming scale and information flows (p. 1202). Building on these insights, I argue that Melissa's reflections illustrate an intuitive orientation to platform space, involving an affectively charged sense of

saturation, specificity, and strategic positioning. Here, Melissa's sense-making is guided by the feeling that content had to land in the "right" place in order to be seen. This spatialised understanding of visibility is part of how algorithmic vibes are constructed, through intuitive responses to the atmospheres of scale and navigability that structure participants' everyday platform experience.

Kimberley and Melissa's reflections illustrate how some participants oriented themselves to the temporal and spatial atmospheres of platforms. Their accounts suggest that algorithmic sense-making is sometimes constructed in response to how platforms feel in terms of pace, saturation, and navigability, and by where participants believe their content might gain visibility. Viewed in relation to the wider participant accounts in this section, these examples demonstrate how participants made sense of platform algorithms by interpreting patterns in visibility and sensing shifts in platform atmospheres. Participant's algorithmic sense-making was informed by observation, reflection, and a felt sense of what platforms appeared to reward with visibility at a given time, and what they might reward in the future. Algorithmic vibes, in this context, were constructed through ongoing engagements with platform conditions and attuned responses to shifting atmospheres. They reflect affective and intuitive orientations that enabled participants to navigate fluctuating dynamics of visibility while negotiating the demands of entrepreneurship.

5.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have proposed 'algorithmic vibes' as a conceptual model for understanding how everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of social media algorithms and the relationship this has with their social media practices. I argue that algorithmic vibes are intuitive orientations to platform algorithms, constructed through participants' ongoing, felt experiences of visibility and their affective responses to algorithmic uncertainty and unpredictability. Visibility was understood by participants in terms of how widely a post appeared to circulate and whether they felt seen or overlooked by a platform.

By developing the concept of algorithmic vibes as intuitive and affective orientations, this chapter directly addresses my first research question, which asks: How do

everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms on a range of social media platforms?

This chapter also addresses my second research question, which asks: What is the nature of the relationship between everyday women-entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and their social media practices?

Participants' intuitive orientations to platform dynamics were closely entangled with reflection on their practices and platform visibility, including how, when, and what they posted. For example, several participants described their approach to improving their platform visibility as "trial and error". Their trial and error approaches usually involved engaging in a specific practice, such as posting a certain type of content, and then deciding on what or how to post next based on how successful they felt the practice was. This usually happened over a period of time, as participants developed a felt sense of what was or was not working.

Participants' decisions about what practices to adopt, engage with, adapt or reject were also grounded in what felt viable, worthwhile, and / or aligned with participants' goals and values. For example, some participants described stepping back from practices that no longer seemed worth the effort because they felt disappointed with the organic reach they were receiving. These decisions were mostly based on a felt sense that certain practices no longer aligned with what platforms appeared to reward.

I argue, therefore, that participants' algorithmic sense-making is entangled with their everyday platform practices and neither sense-making nor practice happens in isolation. The concept of algorithmic vibes captures this entanglement, making visible the affective and intuitive orientations through which participants register and respond to algorithmic conditions, and offering a model of sense-making that understands sense-making practice as co-constructed through lived, felt engagement.

Through the varied participant accounts highlighted in this chapter, I have shown how algorithmic vibes were constructed differently across participants. This relates to my third research question, which asks what differences, if any, exist amongst

different everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and social media practices?

Across participants' accounts, different aspects of intuition, including the conscious and nonconscious, the cognitive and affective (Pedwell 2024), were brought into focus in varied ways, reflecting the diversity of how algorithmic vibes were constructed. For example, whilst some told me they had never "properly" thought about algorithms before the interview, others expressed more deliberate or ongoing reflection on how algorithms work and how they affect their visibility. Additionally, although some participants expressed frustration or disappointment, others expressed curiosity or uncertainty, and the extent to which these feelings affected participants' algorithmic vibes varied.

These differences reveal the multiplicity of ways in which everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of social media algorithms, as well as differences in their social media practices. In Chapter Seven I discuss differences between participants in detail, and argue that algorithmic vibes are situated orientations, formed through the lived conditions of entrepreneurship and participants' positions within society and the platform economy. This chapter has laid a foundation for understanding algorithmic vibes as situated by highlighting how algorithmic vibes are constructed through diverse forms of affective and intuitive orientation.

This chapter also contributes to my investigation of the relationship between platform structures and logics and the algorithmic sense-making and social media practices of everyday women-entrepreneurs, the focus of my fourth research question. My findings show that participants' algorithmic vibes were constructed in relation to the opacity and unpredictability of algorithmic governance.

Drawing on Coleman's (2018) concept of infrastructures of feeling, which I introduced in Chapter Three, I argue that digital platforms produce an ongoing affective present. This is referred to by Coleman as a "present temporality" that is immediate, ongoing, and open-ended. This "present temporality" captures the ways in which users remain attuned to the felt rhythms and fluctuations of platform conditions through ongoing engagement with what the platform seems to demand at

any given moment. My findings show that participants made sense of algorithms within such a temporal frame, as they oriented themselves toward what seemed to be rewarded, felt shifts in platform dynamics before they could fully articulate them, and continuously adjusted their practices in response. Algorithmic vibes, then, are constructed through this affective present. They reflect intuitive and affective orientations to the contingencies of algorithmic visibility, based on the recursive, provisional labour of staying attuned to what the platform appears to value right now.

Additionally, participants' accounts frequently conveyed a felt pressure to remain consistently active on platforms, even in the absence of predictable outcomes. This aligns with Arriagada and Ibáñez's (2020) argument that platform affordances and the economic logic of visibility produce temporal acceleration, compelling content creators to remain "always on." In my study, such pressures were felt through participants' affective and intuitive sense-making, and contributed to the construction of algorithmic vibes. Participants often interpreted frequent posting as something the algorithm might reward, even when this belief could not be confirmed, and adjusted their practices accordingly.

Finally, another temporal dimension of participants' algorithmic sense-making was illuminated in Kimberley's account, where she described adjusting her social media practices in line with different phases of her entrepreneurial practice, as well as her felt sense of what would be rewarded by a platform at any given time. Kimberley alternated between audience-building, engagement, and selling, aligning these shifts with what she sensed the platform was valuing at a particular time. Her account highlights how algorithmic vibes were constructed through an anticipatory orientation to future platform conditions, as well as responses to visible trends. These orientations were shaped by repeated engagement and reflection, forming a temporal sensibility that helped her navigate the unstable rhythms of platform visibility. This is a form of intuitive and affective orientation that underscores the temporal complexity of algorithmic vibes.

These examples also point to the significance of platform atmospheres in shaping participants' algorithmic sense-making. As introduced in Chapter Three, I draw on

Anderson (2009), Ash (2013), and Lupton (2017), to conceptualise platform atmospheres as affective and ambient conditions that emerge through ongoing interactions between users, algorithms, and platform environments. In this chapter, I have shown that participants constructed algorithmic vibes through intuitive orientations to these atmospheres, interpreting what felt currently valued, deprioritised, or expected by platforms at a given time or in a particular space. Temporal atmospheres were especially visible in Kimberley's account, where different platforms felt faster or slower, with content perceived to circulate over extended periods or fade quickly. This sense of the temporal atmosphere of platforms informed her decisions about where and how to post, as she adjusted her frequency, format, and focus in ways that felt attuned to each platform's temporality. Spatial atmospheres were particularly evident in Melissa's reflections on TikTok as "massive," and her sense that content needed to land in the right "side" of the platform in order to be effective. Together, these accounts show that algorithmic vibes are also constructed through participants' affective and intuitive orientations to platform atmospheres.

In conclusion, the findings in this chapter demonstrate that participants' make sense of platform algorithms by constructing intuitive and affective orientations. In the next chapter, I extend the concept of algorithmic vibes by arguing that they are speculative and anticipatory orientations to platform algorithms. I do this by exploring the ways in which participants engage with platform data, particularly metrics such as reach, likes, comments, and views, that provide clues about what platforms might reward with visibility.

Chapter Six: Algorithmic Vibes and the Work of Interpreting Metrics

6.1 Introduction

For everyday women entrepreneurs, social media visibility is a vital condition for generating income, attracting clients, and sustaining their businesses in an increasingly platform-mediated economy. Yet the conditions that shape visibility on these platforms remain opaque. Social media algorithms are impenetrable and lack transparency, meaning users are unable to know with certainty how their content is ranked, distributed, or withheld from audiences (Gillespie 2014; Bucher 2018). For entrepreneurs whose income depends on social media visibility, this opacity affects how they market their products, interact with audiences, and maintain consistent revenue (Cotter 2019). In the absence of accessible, reliable information about how algorithms work, entrepreneurs are left to infer how algorithmic systems operate, and to adapt their practices accordingly (Bishop 2019; Arriagada and Ibáñez 2020).

Social media metrics, which are quantifiable indicators such as reach, views, likes, and comments, play an especially important role in this context because they offer one of the only visible forms of feedback about how content is performing on platforms (Arriagada and Ibáñez 2020; Cotter 2019). As discussed in Chapter Two (Literature Review), metrics are curated forms of platform feedback that invite speculative interpretation (Bucher 2012), reinforcing a platform logic in which quantification and visibility are closely entwined (Bucher 2018).

Throughout this chapter, I argue that social media metrics play a central role in participants' attempts to make sense of algorithms. Metrics offer partial and curated forms of platform feedback that allow users to sense the effects of algorithmic systems on their visibility (Bucher 2012; Chan 2022). However, I argue that it is not the metrics themselves, but the feeling of data (Kennedy and Hill 2018) - the affective charge of feedback and the embodied sense of what is working - that proves most consequential for participants' algorithmic sense-making.

Drawing on my concept of algorithmic vibes, I argue that metrics are ambiguous signals that participants feel, speculate about, respond to in anticipatory ways, and sometimes reject. While some participants developed structured routines for tracking and evaluating data, others approached metrics more intuitively and selectively. A smaller number disengaged from metrics altogether, often in response to the frustration or ambivalence caused by platform opacity and volatility. Across these varied approaches, metrics were interpreted in intuitive and affectively-charged ways. Comments and direct messages from other users were felt by many to hold more meaning than surface-level indicators like reach or views. This was particularly true for participants who rejected so-called vanity metrics, which was a term commonly used by participants to refer to metrics of scale, such as reach, views and follower count, which they felt did not hold tangible value for their businesses. Instead, many participants preferred to focus on feedback, such as comments and Direct Messages (DMs) from other users, which they felt aligned with their business goals and felt relationally or commercially relevant.

Attending to algorithmic vibes in this chapter helps clarify how speculative and anticipatory orientations are constructed through participants' ongoing engagement with metrics, their entrepreneurial aims, and the opaque platform environments in which they work. Participants made sense of metrics by drawing together the limited forms of feedback platforms provide through dashboards and notifications with their own affective responses to visibility, their reflections on what felt viable for their businesses, and their broader practices. Platform opacity also shaped this process by compelling participants to speculate about what might be rewarded while simultaneously creating uncertainty about the present and future relevance of particular metrics. Taken together, these conditions show that algorithmic sense-making develops through an entangled configuration of affect, experience, and practice, in which participants interpret uncertain signals and construct orientations that respond to shifting platform conditions.

There has been limited attention to how everyday entrepreneurs, particularly women, negotiate platform metrics as part of their platform labour. For everyday women entrepreneurs, visibility is closely tied to client acquisition, income generation, and

business sustainability. Yet the feedback available to guide their sense-making with regards to how to achieve this visibility is often ambiguous and tightly controlled by the platform itself. This ambiguity creates conditions in which algorithmic sense-making is necessarily speculative and anticipatory.

My findings build on Kennedy and Hill's (2018) work on the affective dimensions of data, which highlights how data is felt, with emotions playing a central role in how users make sense of metrics. My analysis extends this by showing how affective responses to data contribute to speculative and anticipatory orientations, which I term algorithmic vibes. I also build on Beer's (2016) argument that "not all measures are equal", drawing attention to how platforms selectively foreground certain metrics to guide user attention and structure platform engagement. In my study, participants often resisted these hierarchies by prioritising relational signals over volume-based indicators, such as likes or reach. What's more, metrics are selectively presented by platforms, framed through interface features that often lack contextual clarity (Yeung 2017), and distributed through platform-controlled mechanisms such as dashboards, notifications, and badges. These curatorial practices contribute to the ambiguity of platform feedback and intensify participants' efforts to make sense of what matters.

Consistent with the interpretivist framework underpinning this thesis, the chapter attends closely to participants' own accounts of what metrics mean to them and how they make sense of the feedback platforms provide. I foreground the affective and intuitive ways participants interpret and respond to platform metrics and data. In doing so, I resist epistemic hierarchies (Alcoff and Potter 1993) that might privilege rational, technical or strategic approaches to data analysis, and instead recognise participants' meaning-making as forms of lived knowledge grounded in embodied and contextual experience.

Therefore, this chapter contributes directly to the research questions guiding this thesis. It addresses my first and second research questions, which are:

- 1) How do everyday women-entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms on a range of social media platforms?

2) What is the nature of the relationship between everyday women-entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and their social media practices?

It does this by examining how everyday women entrepreneurs engage with social media metrics as a way of making sense of platform algorithms, and the relationship this has with their practices. It also speaks to my third research question which asks:

3) What differences, if any, exist amongst different everyday women-entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and social media practices?

It does this by highlighting differences among participants, including variations in skill, confidence, orientation, and goals. Finally, it contributes to my fourth research question which is:

4) What is the relationship between platform structures and logics and the algorithmic sense-making and social media practices of everyday women-entrepreneurs?

It addresses this question by highlighting how participant's algorithmic sense-making, as it relates to metrics, is informed by platform infrastructures and broader forces of platform governance.

In what follows, I begin by examining how participants encounter and engage with platform metrics on social media platforms, drawing attention to the limited and curated forms of feedback that platforms make visible. I then explore how participants make sense of metrics as proxies for algorithmic logics, focusing on the affective and intuitive ways participants interpreted feedback and navigated uncertainty. Building on this, I examine participants' speculative and anticipatory sense-making practices, showing how they developed a felt sense of what platforms might reward, and how they might adjust their practices accordingly. The next section explores how participants negotiated tensions between so-called "vanity metrics" and what they considered to be signals of more meaningful connection such as comments or direct messages. I then turn to participants' aspirational orientations, examining how platform metrics were entangled with disciplinary thresholds and the promise of visibility and income. Together, these sections develop my argument that algorithmic vibes are not only intuitive and affective, as

outlined in Chapter Five, but also speculative and anticipatory - constructed through selective engagements with platform feedback, interpretive labour, and the felt pressures of platform governance.

6.2 Encountering Platform Metrics

On most mainstream social media platforms, business users are provided with access to account-level data that is not available to non-business users. For example, Meta Business Suite enables business users to view detailed analytics for their Facebook and Instagram accounts, including metrics such as reach, impressions, engagement, and clicks (see Figure 11 and Figure 12). Comparable dashboards are available to business users and content creators on TikTok, LinkedIn, Pinterest, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter), although on X access to the analytics dashboard is restricted to premium subscribers (see Figure 13).

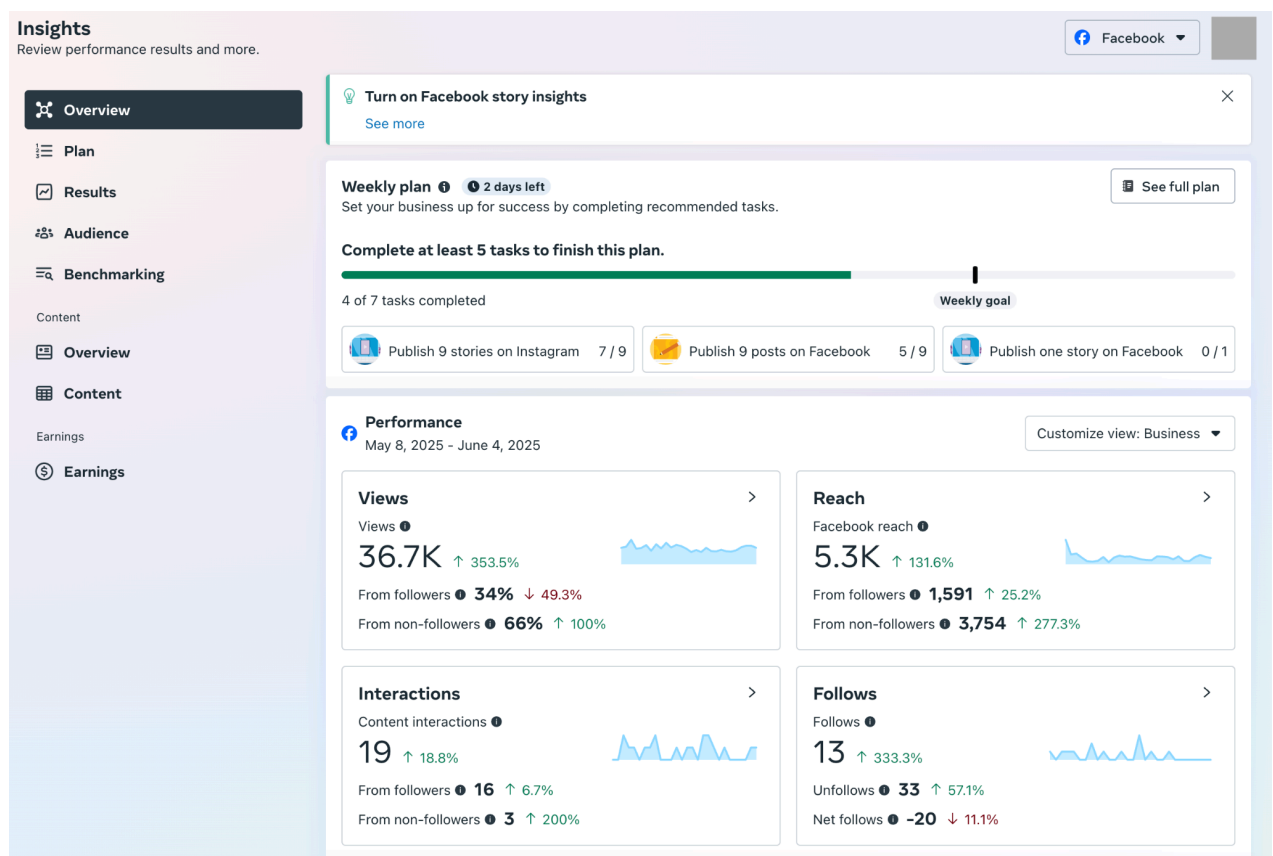


Figure 11: Screenshot of the Facebook Insights dashboard.

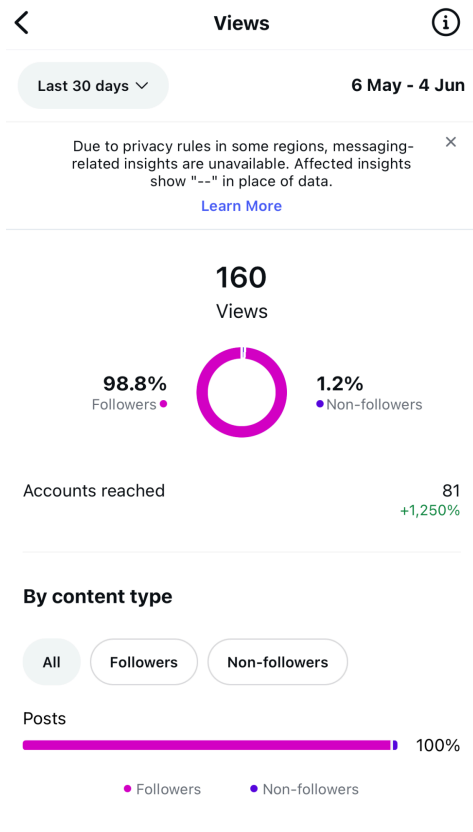


Figure 12: Screenshot of the 'views' screen on the Instagram Insights dashboard.

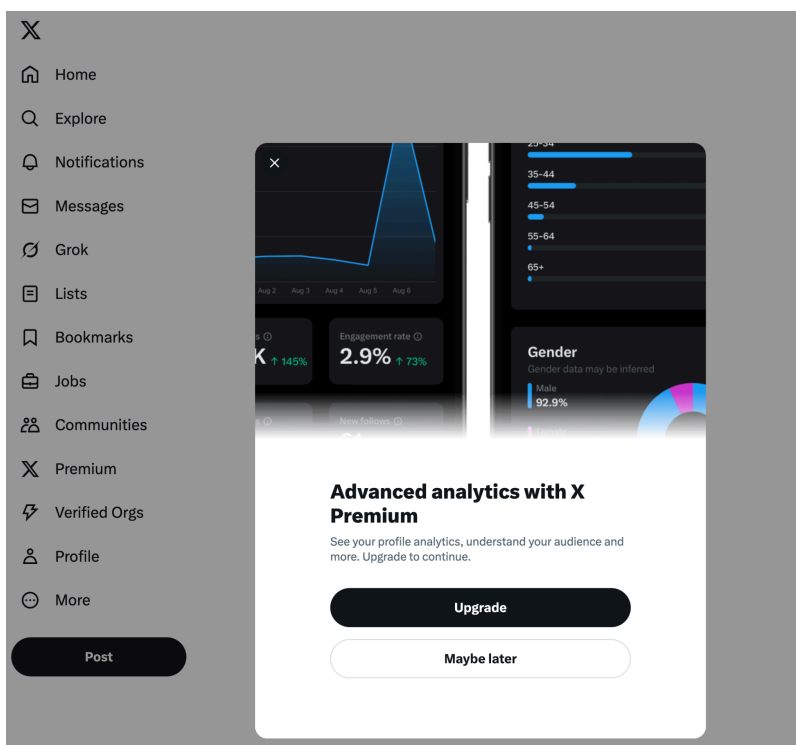


Figure 13: Screenshot shows the pop-up that appears when a non-premium user attempts to access their account analytics dashboard on X.

Participant's such as Michelle, the Sports Massage Therapist I introduced in Chapter Five, told me that she reviews key metrics in Instagram Insights on a regular monthly basis, because:

"It's all set out quite easily to look at. It's not like you really have to go like finding it or there's secret ways to get into insights is there?...It's pretty easy to get hold of."

The design of these dashboards varies across platforms, yet they share a common emphasis on making platform-generated data visible and actionable for business users. On Instagram, for example, performance is visualised through pie charts (Figure 12), whereas Facebook presents metrics using line graphs and colour-coded indicators (Figure 11). These visual cues draw users' attention to specific measures such as views, reach or interactions, signalling what the platform considers meaningful. It is typical for platforms to display data primarily as visualisations, as in these two examples, although some platforms offer the option to export data in spreadsheet format for off-platform analysis. This aligns with Kennedy and Hill's (2017) observation that data is increasingly encountered through visual and graphical formats, rather than through direct engagement with raw datasets. These visualisations do more than display data and instead orient users toward particular evaluative practices (Zheng 2024).

In addition to accessing metrics through platform-provided dashboards, social media users can also encounter limited data directly at the level of the post. Most mainstream platforms display certain metrics alongside individual posts, although the type and quantity of data available varies across platforms. For example, on Instagram, users can view the total number of likes and comments their post has received (see Figure 14), while on TikTok users are able to see the number of likes, comments, bookmarks, and shares associated with a post. The prominent placement of these metrics is important because it enables users to gauge the relative success and reach of their content without needing to navigate to more detailed analytics dashboards.



Figure 14: Example of post-level data visible on an Instagram Business account (Participant pseudonym: Elizabeth). Number of likes and comments are visible.

As I will go on to discuss, it was common for participants to check post-level metrics in the hours and days following publication of a social media post. This practice allows for a quicker and more intuitive monitoring of the platform feedback that participants considered, rather than navigating platform dashboard interfaces. However, it is crucial to recognise that what is rendered visible at the post level is determined by the platform itself. Platforms exercise power not only in curating the range of metrics accessible through dashboards, but also in deciding which indicators are made immediately available alongside posts. In this way, platform design shapes users' sense of what counts as important or meaningful data (Zheng 2024). Furthermore, post-level metrics are often publicly accessible to other users, introducing an additional layer of social visibility to certain forms of engagement. Although some platforms, such as Instagram, now allow users to hide like and comment counts, the public nature of post-level metrics may influence how users

perceive and interpret their own, and others', social media performance. As Bucher (2018) argues, the "pervasive display of numbers" on platform interfaces, such as on Facebook, appears to suggest to users that "more is better" (p. 11-12).

In addition to platform-native dashboards, there are also social media analytics tools provided by third-party companies, offering businesses and creators additional means of data analysis and social media management. For example, the social media management platform Later enables users to rank posts by engagement rate, allowing them to quickly identify high-performing content. Other, more advanced solutions, such as Sprout Social, generate comprehensive reports that incorporate data visualisations. A small number of newer tools, such as Mandala AI, integrate artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to automate the analysis of social media data and produce predictive or interpretive reports. However, the majority of third-party analytic tools require a paid subscription, and no participants in this study reported using such tools for data analysis. Instead, participants relied exclusively on the (free) analytics provided within platform-native dashboards. Accordingly, platform-provided metrics and dashboards form the primary focus of this chapter, reflecting the structures of access and platform governance within which participants' algorithmic sense-making unfolds.

Additionally, although platforms provide analytics dashboards and post-level metrics, participants also encountered less formal indicators of visibility. Several described becoming aware of reduced reach not through metrics, but through follower messages, for instance, users asking whether they were still in business, or remarking that a post had appeared in their feed for the first time in weeks. These comments acted as informal visibility signals, often prompting reflection or concern, and further highlighting the fragmented and relational ways in which algorithmic sense-making takes place.

6.3 Everyday Sense-Making: Working with Platform Metrics

6.3.1 Metrics as Proxies for Algorithmic Logics

Given the opacity of platform algorithms, metrics represent an important site through which users attempt to make sense of algorithmic logics. Because the internal

processes of social media algorithms are largely inaccessible, metrics such as reach, views, likes, and comments function as one of the only visible and tangible forms of platform feedback available to users. These metrics, which tend to centre on reach and engagement, offer explicit signals about how content appears to be performing, providing entrepreneurs with observable indications of what the platform may be rewarding. Cotter (2018), studying professional influencers rather than everyday entrepreneurs, found that users interpret engagement metrics as indications of algorithmic preferences and adjust their practices accordingly, viewing engagement both as a measure of success and a mechanism for increasing visibility. Alongside visible metrics, participants in my study also attend to more implicit signals, such as changes in the volume or content of direct messages or comments on their posts. These implicit signals, although not necessarily quantifiable, contribute to users' sense-making practices. In this context, metrics and engagement patterns together offer partial and ambiguous indications of platform logics. By using these signals to infer how platform logics might be affecting their visibility and what platforms may reward in future, participants engaged in speculative interpretation and anticipatory adjustment.

Participants' narratives demonstrated that metrics became woven into everyday practices of algorithmic sense-making. By informally reviewing their social media data, many participants sought to gain a working sense of how platform algorithms might be shaping their visibility at any given moment. It was common for participants to describe such an approach to evaluation and, by extension, algorithmic sense-making, in simple terms. As Julia, a Personal Trainer and Health Coach, said:

“It's just about looking at what things are people more interested in engaging...so it gives you more of an idea of what is working and you can try and do more of that.”

Prior to self-employment, Julia was a Senior Manager for a Drug and Alcohol Service. She shared with me how her experiences of having a hormone imbalance led her to train in fitness and health, and subsequently to become self-employed. She is a 53 year old Black Caribbean woman, with no children under the age of 18. Her primary source of income is self-employment and her total household income is

in the £30,000 to £39,000 bracket. Julia's approach to evaluation, reflected in the quote above, illustrates that participants engaged in ongoing efforts to interpret patterns of engagement as clues about how visibility might be achieved or lost.

In order to evaluate their social media activity, everyday women entrepreneurs identified the metrics they perceived as most meaningful or relevant to their business goals. In Julia's case, as with most participants, metrics such as likes, comments, views, and shares were prioritised because they were perceived to offer a reliable indication of visibility and audience engagement. Reach, which is an estimation of the number of people who have seen a post (Facebook 2024), was also deemed valuable by many, though not all, participants. For example, Alice, the Happiness Coach I introduced in Chapter Five, valued reach and post engagement as key metrics, based on her overarching goal: "my content being seen by the right people and the right people engaging with it". Alice was experimenting with different posting frequencies on LinkedIn as part of an anticipatory effort to understand how changes in activity might affect her visibility, as she told me:

"I've learned from experience...for me anyway, less is more particularly on LinkedIn. So, for example, last week when I did my five days of posting my reach just gradually plummeted...Hardly anyone saw my Friday post and I've kind of experienced this before, but I just thought...these things change...so [now] one of the things I do to get more reach is to post less. So actually I found my sweet spot for LinkedIn is probably once a week."

This was a form of speculative sense-making shaped by uncertainty about how the algorithm would respond. By tracking the reach and engagement on her LinkedIn posts, Alice determined that posting less frequently led to improved reach per post, equating to greater visibility.

It is important to note that not all participants actively engaged with platform metrics. For some, including Catherine, who runs self-care and wellbeing events, metrics were viewed as peripheral to the work of running a business that they found personally rewarding and fulfilling. During our interview, Catherine, who had been in business for approximately five years at the time of our interview, opened Facebook Insights for the first time and expressed scepticism about its practical value:

“Why would I look at my insights?... What benefit is there?... Like, oh it’s nice it’s gone up 11% [engagement] but what does that actually mean as a business?...What can I do with those people...how can I get them to click on my website and buy from me?”

Although she acknowledged an interest in having a resource hub that could explain how metrics might support business growth, she remained unconvinced that such data had immediate or tangible value.

Catherine explained that she rarely checked metrics on her posts, partly because she was busy, both with her business and raising children, but also because she placed limited importance on their meaning:

“I don’t put that much value in it... I don’t know if that’s right or wrong but... I’m not like, if this post nobody sees it... it doesn’t mean that my business isn’t good... it might just be that nobody’s looked at it or people are busy or whatever... it doesn’t really... reflect on my business. It’s just one of those things.”

Her disengagement from metrics reflected a relational orientation that prioritised building relationships and delivering value to her followers, over platform visibility. As she put it:

“I do my social media but I make a conscious effort that it’s not the be all and end all. I know what I do is really good... it’s just a way of kind of getting this little community together.”

Catherine’s orientation provides an important counterpoint to data-driven strategies that treat metrics as tools for optimising visibility or performance. Her comments exemplify how algorithmic sense-making can involve deliberate disengagement from metrics that feel misaligned with one’s values or business purpose. In this way, Catherine’s refusal to attribute meaning to metrics is a resistance to allowing platform logics to define what counts as success. This resonates with the protective orientations described elsewhere in this chapter, in which participants manage the affective demands of visibility by creating their own criteria for meaningful engagement and value.

6.3.2 Affective Responses to Platform Feedback

Not all metrics are presented equally by platforms themselves. Certain metrics, such as likes, reach, and views, are made highly visible through dashboards, notifications, and interface features, while others are more obscure. As Beer (2016) argues, “not all measures are equal” (p. 77); metrics are not neutral reflections of activity, but a way of structuring meaning that uses curated signals to guide users’ attention and shape their sense of success and visibility. Platforms actively shape user perception and practices through interface design, real-time feedback, and curated signals of performance (Beer 2016; Grosser 2014). As Yeung (2017) argues, platforms use interface design and data-driven nudging to steer users toward particular orientations and actions. On social media, push notifications, achievement badges, and colour-coded indicators work as feedback mechanisms, encouraging users to track and respond to specific metrics. Zuboff (2019) describes real-time feedback as central to ‘instrumentarian power’: a mode of governance that works through constant data monitoring and subtle modulation of user activity over time.

These mechanisms often carry affective weight, shaping how users feel about their visibility and performance. One participant who illustrated the affective pull of such mechanisms was Phoebe, the Astrologer I introduced in Chapter Five. She shared several screenshots showing how Meta encouraged her to engage with her Facebook Page metrics. Commenting on the ‘Rising Creator’ notification shown in Figure 15, which informed Phoebe that she was in the top 5% of rising creators that week, she messaged: “I do love a pat on the back from FB. And this one gives me all the feels 😊”. The Rising Creator notification included a trophy symbol and words that encouraged Phoebe to celebrate “this amazing milestone”.

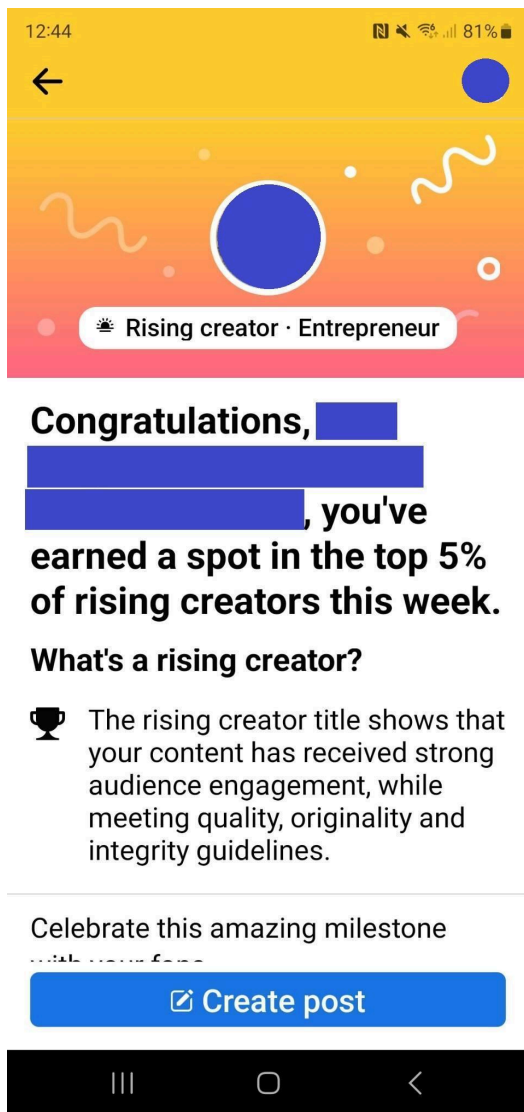


Figure 15: Screenshot provided by participant of the 'Rising Creator' notification they received on Facebook

Phoebe's response to platform feedback illustrates how metrics can carry an affective charge, prompting feelings of affirmation and satisfaction that shape how participants sometimes reflected on and shared their practices. In my observations of the 'Mastermind' Facebook group (see Chapter Four - Methodology) I observed Phoebe sharing a screenshot of her Facebook post insights in a group message (Figure 16). Alongside the screenshot, which shows metrics for post impressions, post reach, and post engagement, Phoebe included a caption with a bold title that reads "I just want to share a little win".

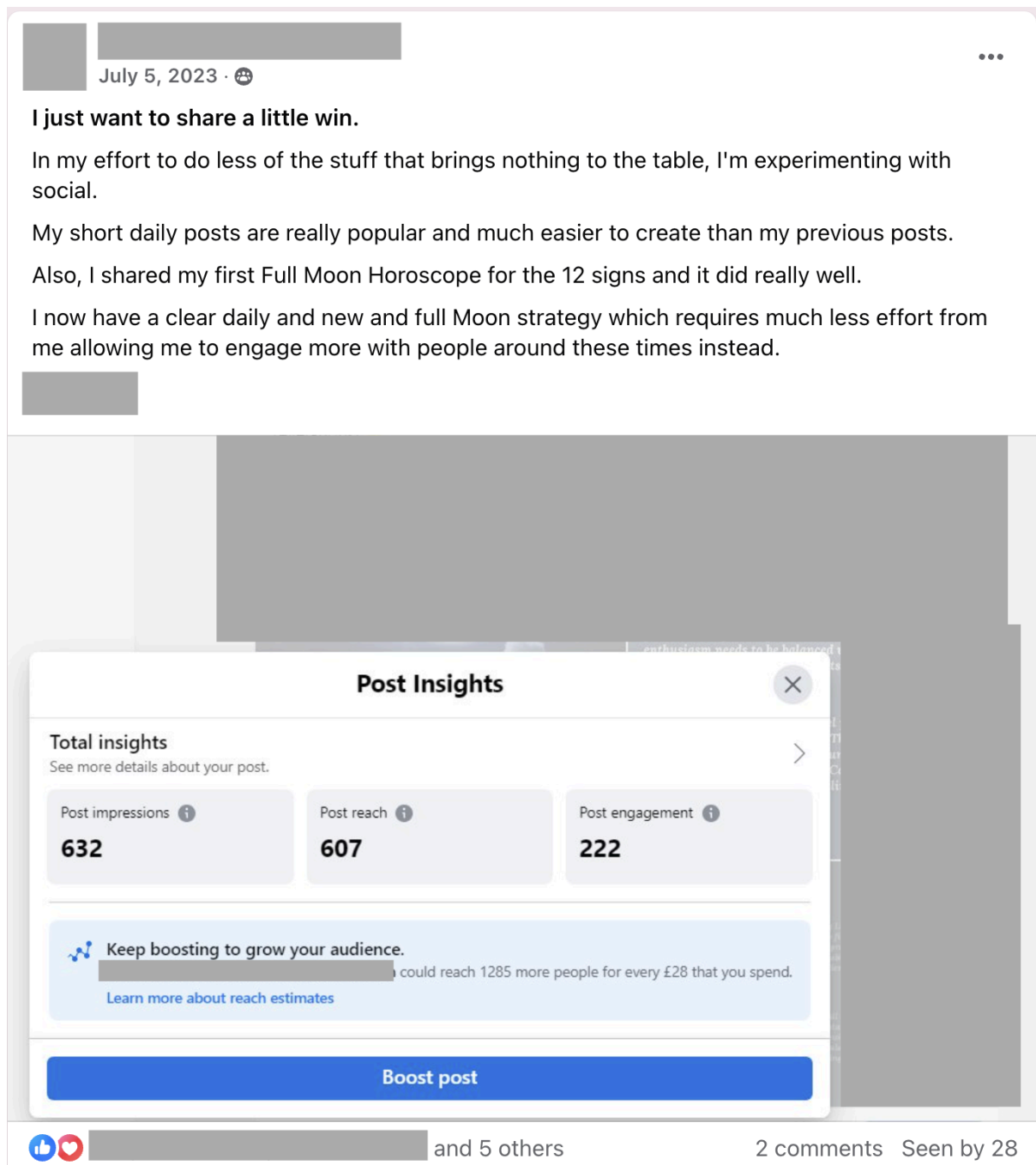
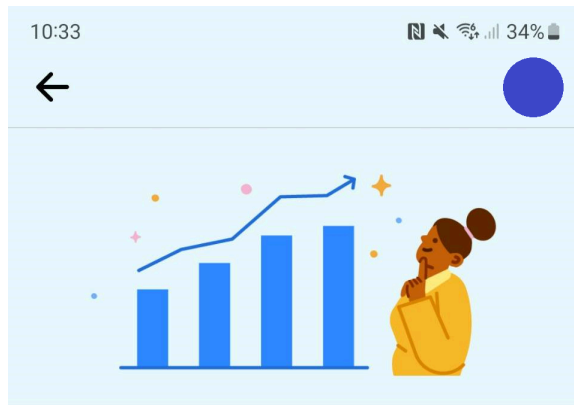


Figure 16: Phoebe's post in the 'Mastermind' Facebook Group

That Phoebe chose to share this post with others is analytically significant. It suggests that she felt affectively affirmed by it, so much so that she chose to share it with her peers as evidence of progress and possibility. In doing so, she frames metrics as relational signals that can be publicly owned and celebrated. Her language reflects a sense of speculative experimentation and pragmatic, anticipatory adjustment, where 'what works' is defined through a combination of ease,

resonance, and reduced labour. Phoebe attunes to forms of feedback that feel sustainable and relationally rewarding; she feels she now has a strategy “which requires much less effort”. This example reinforces how platform metrics are filtered through speculative and anticipatory orientations to algorithmic sense-making. For Phoebe, a “little win” is a felt alignment between platform feedback, reduced effort, and the ability to connect meaningfully with others. For her, it was a moment worth sharing.

These moments of encouragement and reassurance were complicated, however, by a sense of inconsistency. At another time, Phoebe received a notification from Facebook that said “quality posts and daily engagement with your audience have increased your visibility for 88 days” (Figure 17). The notification included an image of a generic bar chart graph with an upwards arrow, and a pensive looking cartoon figure looking up at the highest point of the graph. Reflecting on this notification, Phoebe questioned the platform’s presentation of visibility data, noting that the message she received did not align with what she saw in her analytics dashboard. Her ambivalence reflects a broader trend among participants, where metrics could momentarily induce positive feelings and a sense of encouragement, whilst also provoking confusion and scepticism. This is reminiscent of the quote from Catherine above: “Oh it’s nice it’s gone up 11% but what does that actually mean, like as a business? What can I do with those people?”



Quality posts and daily engagement with your audience have increased your visibility for 88 days.

What does increased visibility mean?

- Increased visibility is the opportunity for your content to be viewed more broadly
- Increased visibility is given to those who consistently post high-quality



Reel



Post



Figure 17: Screenshot of notification participant received from Meta on their Facebook Page encouraging 'quality posts and daily engagement'

Positive feedback moments were often fleeting, while negative or ambiguous metrics frequently left a stronger impression, prompting emotional withdrawal or changes in practice. Although Phoebe had felt briefly encouraged by the 'Rising Creator' badge, she later messaged me during a time-limited marketing campaign to express renewed frustration. After reviewing her results in Meta Business Suite, she wrote: "I've just lost faith in FB once again.....This is after a week of including promotions in my content". Figure 18 shows the screenshot Phoebe sent along with this message, which shows her Facebook Insights dashboard, with a red arrow and red graph line

indicating that her organic reach had decreased during the last 28 days. This shift in Phoebe's attitude towards Facebook and her metrics illustrates how the emotional highs of platform-endorsed success can be quickly undermined by a lack of transparency or tangible impact. Phoebe's fluctuating responses, from affirmation to frustration, reflect the felt experience of algorithmic precarity and platform volatility. In this way, platforms circulate feelings that orient users towards the platform in hopeful, disillusioned, or ambivalent ways.



Figure 18: Screenshot of Phoebe's analytics dashboard in Meta Business Suite, showing Facebook Reach

It is important to note that engagement with metrics and platform notifications were not the only ways that Phoebe made sense of algorithms. As discussed throughout this chapter and Chapter Five, her approach was multifaceted, involving intuition, customer interaction, long-term business experience, and an ongoing negotiation with what felt reliable or worthwhile. What Phoebe experiences highlight is that feelings of ambivalence can accompany platform-curated feedback, even when such feedback evokes positive feelings, it may still be met with doubt or dismissal. This is precisely where algorithmic vibes become analytically useful, as it captures the ways participants like Phoebe make sense of and respond to platform feedback, not only because it lacks transparency, but because of how it feels. Crucially, algorithmic vibes are not constructed through a neutral reading of platform feedback. That is, they do not arise automatically in response to a badge, metric, or notification. Rather, they emerge through an ongoing, situated relationship to platform dynamics, which is shaped by participants' accumulated experience, practical knowledge, emotional investment, and their sense of what matters in their work. The same signal might be embraced, ignored, or resisted, depending on how it resonates with a participant's goals, confidence, or prior encounters with platform volatility. In this way, algorithmic vibes capture a more embodied and contingent form of sense-making that exceeds what platforms formally present as meaningful.

6.4 Speculative and Anticipatory Evaluation Practices

Although platforms attempt to steer users toward particular metrics through affective nudges, it was common for participants to adopt a selective approach to metrics, deciding for themselves which forms of feedback were most meaningful and useful to their work. The use of "trackers" was instrumental in this process, which typically took the form of simple spreadsheets or tables. Many participants told me that they use their own off-platform tracker to record key metrics, usually on a weekly or monthly basis, as a way of evaluating their performance. It was common practice for a tracker to be used to compare performance across platforms, rather than evaluating each platform in isolation.

Deciding which metrics matter, and how to access and interpret them, was also influenced by the participant's perceptions of their own level of skill and confidence in

working with data. Analytics dashboards on social media platforms can be complex and are therefore more or less accessible depending on a user's technical competency and confidence. As Kennedy and Hill (2018) assert, when individuals lack confidence in their skills of data comprehension and analysis - what they term "skills to decode" - this can significantly affect their engagement with data (p. 839). They also argue that people's perception of their ability to make sense of data is as important as their actual abilities.

For my participants, limited data literacy often reinforced the need for more intuitive and speculative modes of algorithmic sense-making. Participants tended to notice surface-level patterns and fluctuations in visible metrics, forming general impressions about performance, such as whether a post "felt like it was doing well", rather than undertaking systematic analysis or comparison across time periods, platforms, or content types. Their engagement with data was pragmatic, intuitive, and responsive to immediate signals, rather than structured through formal methods of data analysis or strategic optimisation. In this context, algorithmic vibes can be understood as a response to a lack of confidence in their ability to formally analyse the data provided by platforms. Where formal decoding was difficult or unfamiliar, participants engaged in speculative forms of sense-making, treating data not as something to be felt, sensed, and navigated.

For example, Farrah, the Perfume Retailer I introduced in Chapter Five, explained how she regularly accessed metrics in 'Instagram Insights', Instagram's analytics dashboard. However, in terms of "skills to decode" Farrah did not utilise Facebook Insights because she was unsure how to access the dashboard. Instead, she tried to make sense of Instagram metrics and use this to inform her practices across both Instagram and Facebook. On a monthly basis, Farrah records key metrics, namely views, reach, post saves, shares, profile visits and followers, in a tracking spreadsheet. Although Farrah felt that frequent changes to the dashboard made Instagram Insights challenging to engage with at times, she continued to make consistent use of it. She felt that this was a useful practice, explaining:

“I suppose it just makes you think okay what worked, what didn't, why has things worked, why have I got more followers, what did I do that month, and then it makes you think okay that's what I need to do more of then.”

Recently, this practice of evaluation had led Farrah to conclude that photos that included her face garnered more visibility and engagement than photos that only featured her product. She told me:

“I definitely saw a massive difference when I stopped doing just standard photos from the company to when I started personally showing my face on. Like those ones always work the best, the ones that have my face.”

Farrah's evaluation was based mostly on a felt sense that certain posts performed better than others. She speculated that photos featuring her face were more likely to be rewarded by the algorithm, and consequently adapted her posting strategy. Her orientation toward the platform became anticipatory, based on the belief that aligning with perceived algorithmic preferences, in this case, visual self-presentation, might lead to increased reach in the future. Farrah's example illustrates how speculative evaluation unfolds through selective engagement with metrics, as participants anticipate what might enhance their visibility based on felt patterns.

Yet for many participants, Farrah included, numerical metrics were not the only signals that participants attended to. Several participants told me that they valued relational signals, such as comments and conversations, and often felt that these signals were more meaningful and more directly connected to their business goals than numerical metrics. In these cases, participants' orientations were anticipatory not only in relation to platform logics, but also to what they believed would prompt engagement or resonance from their audiences.

Although Farrah recorded and reflected on several key metrics, as discussed earlier, she explained that the signal she prioritised was comments on her posts. In response to my question, “What does success look like to you in terms of social media?” Farrah said:

“I suppose if people comment that's what I like. The more comments I get, I feel like that makes me happy. Rather than how many people have seen it. I mean like one time I think it [got] 3000 hits and it was just like ooh what? why? and it was just literally me putting mascara on...so that was weird. But I think that was just a one-off...I prefer comments...Because the more questions I get then I don't have to think about it that's my next post isn't it. So like comments, questions, interacting, I think that's how I see success.”

Farrah's emphasis on comments reveals how affect, evaluation, and content strategy are entangled in her approach to social media. Her statement that receiving comments makes her happy, points to their affective charge, that is, they were not only read as useful signals but *felt* as meaningful, motivating, and rewarding. Unlike reach, which she described as potentially anomalous and difficult to interpret - “I think it [got] 3000 hits...so that was weird” - comments provided a more tangible and relational form of feedback. In particular, comments that took the form of questions were viewed by Farrah as especially valuable, offering inspiration for future posts and alleviating the burden of constant ideas generation.

Farrah's approach illustrates how algorithmic sense-making is not a separate activity from content production, but intimately intertwined with it. Her understanding of what constitutes success on social media prioritises relational forms of engagement, such as comments and questions, which orient her affectively toward her audience and sustain her ongoing practices of content production. In this way, the process of interpreting platform signals and the process of producing content are co-constituted. Drawing on Ahmed's (2006) concept of orientation, we might understand Farrah as being affectively and speculatively oriented toward signals that build gradually through relational engagement, rather than the ephemerality of platform reach.

Farrah's evaluative practices, which were echoed by many of my participants, also resonate with what Cotter (2019) describes as 'relational influence', wherein success is pursued through building meaningful audience interactions, rather than through 'simulated influence', which prioritises metrics as social currency. In privileging comments over views, Farrah actively reorders the significance of metrics in relation

to her values, her labour, and her sense of what platform success looks and feels like.

This orientation toward audience resonance, rather than solely algorithmic visibility, shaped not only what participants evaluated, but how. As the following examples show, some participants made only minimal use of numerical metrics, or engaged with platform data in highly selective ways. These varied approaches reflected an interplay between participants' levels of confidence and skill in engaging with platform data, and their anticipatory orientations toward the kinds of feedback that felt actionable or aligned with their values.

For some participants, metrics were incorporated into their everyday practices in intuitive or surface-level ways, without extensive engagement with dashboard analytics. For example, Bhavana, a Holistic Therapist who practices Reiki, sound healing, and colour therapy, explained that she did not know how to access or use the analytics dashboard on Instagram and therefore would only take note of the number of likes her posts garnered, gathering this data at a post level. Although her limited engagement with Instagram's analytics dashboard was shaped in part by her data literacy, or what Kennedy and Hill (2018) refer to as her 'skills to decode', she was content with her approach. Bhavana drew on the metrics that felt relevant to her goals and values, rather than treating data as something to master or decode in technical terms. Like many participants, her definition of success was relational and practical:

"Getting engagement in the posts I put up, getting them new sort of people coming through, and also...getting people to sort of buy as well."

Similarly, Hulwi, a Coach for Muslim Women, acknowledged that platforms like Instagram are oriented around metrics - "specifically numbers of followers going up, comments, engagement, having that liveliness I think on that platform". However, her focus remained on what those signals revealed about relationships and client interest. Like Farrah, Hulwi valued the comments and Direct Messages (DMs) she received not only as signs of visibility but as prompts for further action: "what are they raising, what are the topics, what their questions are and so on, and you're kind

of responding to that and adapting to that.” For her, social media was primarily a networking tool, and success was measured through building connections with potential clients, collaborators, and peers. As she put it, “building these networking relationships...like connecting with other people that are either in the same niche or...you can work together in some kind of project or something...that would be more of a social media success.” This perspective reflects an anticipatory and relational orientation toward platform use, in which feedback is valued as a medium through which long-term relationships and possibilities are cultivated.

Hulwi’s comments here also underscores the temporal and embodied labour involved in sustaining a social media presence. As she noted, “you need stamina for this.” As discussed in Chapter Five, such an orientation reflects not only a commitment to longevity but also resistance to the extractive logics of platform culture; demands that continually draw on users’ time, attention, affect, and self-presentation in order to remain visible and relevant (Duffy 2017; Srnicek 2017). It gestures toward a consciously sustained relationship with social media that resists the always-on hustle and algorithmic pressure to be constantly producing, optimising, and performing (Chairunnisah and Kurnia 2023). For Hulwi, success is about cumulative connection rather than immediate visibility, the ability to remain visible enough, to remain oriented toward others, and to do so without sacrificing wellbeing or purpose.

Hulwi’s reflections offer a clear example of how metrics function as part of a speculative and anticipatory process of algorithmic sense-making, which I conceptualise as algorithmic vibes. Although she does not engage with the platform’s analytics dashboard, she described a practice of routinely observing visible signals such as spikes in follower numbers or occasional drops in engagement. These changes prompt reflective speculation:

“Oh, so there was like a spike in numbers, it’s gone up, so what could I think helped that. Or if I have a few unfollowers, OK is it anything particular that I can think that I could have done or happened that caused this.”

Here, metrics are not simply read or analysed, but felt and interpreted in relation to recent activity and memory, assembling a patterned set of signals that guide her orientation to what practices might be working.

Hulwi clearly stated that she does not try to “figure out what’s the algorithm right now”, and rejected intensive optimisation practices, explaining: “I’ll genuinely be honest, I don’t pay too much attention to that.” Instead, she emphasised her capacity to pick up on subtle shifts in platform trends or user practices: “I can pick up on that quite easily, I notice there’s something different and I see it.” Her approach reflects an intuitive orientation to platform atmospheres and signals, which aligns with the logic of algorithmic vibes as an ongoing, affective orientation rather than a fixed body of knowledge. This orientation reflects the sensitivity to platform atmospheres and the embodied noticing of trends discussed in Chapter Five.

Over time, Hulwi’s approach to social media metrics and platform feedback had shifted from initial overwhelm to intuitive and speculative orientation. Early in her business journey, she recalled feeling daunted by the ambiguity and abundance of platform data:

“I think at the beginning social media seemed...quite overwhelming...not knowing what these people are doing and how’s it working and then having to sit and look at information and data. It can get too much.”

Rather than orienting herself toward the platform’s logic of continual adjustment and optimisation, Hulwi consciously resisted: “I can’t be bothered, let me just do whatever I want.” This resistance led to the development of a more situated, self-trusted mode of sense-making. Although she remains attuned to platform atmospheres, noticing changes in other users’ practices, she is clear that her approach is not based on mimicry or reactive copying. As she explained:

“I work quite intuitively, so I’m not, I’m not really sticking to what others are doing, really. I’m just going with my own flow.”

Hulwi’s evolving practice shows how such signals can be selectively interpreted and integrated into a mode of working that aligns with one’s own capacity, confidence, and goals. Her case highlights that algorithmic sense-making on platforms does not

always follow a logic of optimisation or emulation. Instead, it can involve a careful balancing of intuitive orientation to shifts in atmosphere with a sustained commitment to one's own values and a longer-term orientation towards relationship building, even within the normative pressures of platform visibility culture.

6.5 Tension Between “Vanity Metrics” and “Meaningful Connection”

Participants often contrasted their focus on signals related to relationship-building, such as comments or direct messages, with what they commonly referred to as “vanity metrics,” signalling a deliberate departure from surface-level indicators like likes, reach or follower counts. Natalie, a Business Development Coach who provides a variety of services including graphic design, organisation and personal and business development for entrepreneurs, described vanity metrics as follows: “It’s like it feels good. It is pure vanity, you know. I’ve got all these likes on it, it makes you feel good.”

For participants like Visual Impact Specialist Alison identifying and de-prioritising vanity metrics was also linked to shifting priorities over time. Alison designs brands for small businesses, including social media templates and website graphics. She described earlier anxieties about numerical reach and engagement, such as comments, which gave way to a more relational and sustained orientation, which prioritised ongoing presence and resonance over fluctuating numbers.

“I used to really panic about numbers. So like if I posted it and it was only going to maybe a hundred people. Those hundred people all could have commented and it would have been absolutely amazing. But then if I posted that and it went to like 400 people and only like two people commented, then I’d be panicking. What did this one do? And why did that one go and that one didn’t? But I don’t take it all that seriously anymore. I’ve got to the point where it’s just...more trying to stay relevant in their news feeds, than specific numbers.”

Alison's narrative reveals a long-standing prioritisation of engagement over reach. Even when she felt anxious about metrics, it was not the absolute number of impressions that concerned her, but the absence of meaningful interaction in relation to perceived visibility. A post reaching only 100 people was seen as successful if it sparked dialogue, whereas a post reaching 400 but with minimal comments triggered worry and self-doubt. This illustrates that Alison made sense of platform metrics by comparing different posts and paying attention to how her audience responded. What mattered was not just how many people saw a post, but whether that visibility translated into engagement, especially comments. Alison's early feelings of panic reflected her struggle to make sense of what appeared to be inconsistent feedback from the platform. When a post with low reach generated high engagement, it felt successful; when a post with high reach received little response, it raised doubts. These mismatches created confusion about what the platform was rewarding, making it difficult to develop a stable sense of what worked. Her anxiety can therefore be understood as a response to the ambiguity of platform metrics and the broader opacity of algorithmic logics. In addition, Alison's response reflects the emotional and affective dimension of engaging with data, particularly when metrics feel ambiguous or difficult to interpret. Kennedy and Hill (2018) emphasise that data are not experienced in purely rational or analytical ways. Instead, users often encounter data, especially numerical feedback, through a range of emotional responses, especially when they feel they lack the tools or confidence to "decode" what the data is telling them. Although Alison did not lack skill or experience, her account shows how even seasoned users can experience platform feedback as emotionally volatile when it fails to align with their expectations or values.

Over time, Alison's approach shifted. With eight years of business experience and a sense of continuity in client work - "I must be doing something because it's never stopped" - she reoriented her evaluation practices. Her goal became less about maximising numbers and more about maintaining a consistent presence, to ensure that her content continued to appear in her audience's feeds, signalling ongoing relevance and keeping her brand in view, even in subtle or ambient ways. Her focus on "relevance" rather than reach reframes visibility as a matter of sustained connection and recognition, rather than a matter of scale alone. This transition reflects a broader pattern in participants' accounts, where they actively deterred from

chasing so-called “vanity metrics”, such as likes, views, and follower counts, and oriented their practices toward audience quality, emotional resonance, and continuity of presence.

It was common for participants to challenge the value of so-called vanity metrics, asserting that such metrics have little relevance to their business goals if they do not translate into substantive conversations, enquiries, or sales. As Claire, a Business Coach for women entrepreneurs, stated:

“Quality not quantity, for sure. You know, I'm not driven by vanity metrics in any way...if I have 20,000 followers on Instagram but I'm not getting any website visits from Instagram, I'm not getting any business from Instagram, that's not successful for me because it's all about leads at the end of the day.”

Claire's comment highlights a practical, outcome-oriented approach to metrics, shared by many participants, in which numbers were valued for their ability to generate leads, conversations, or sales.

Similarly, Elizabeth, the Dance Teacher I introduced in Chapter Five, reflected critically on how easy it is to perform engagement on platforms, noting that actions like ‘likes’ or ‘loves’ require minimal effort and may not indicate genuine interest. She was conscious that a ‘like’ or ‘love’ reaction could be made in “a nanosecond,” whereas a substantive comment required time and effort, and therefore signalled more meaningful interest. Astrologer Phoebe also expressed scepticism about the value of view counts and viral reach: “People are sharing posts saying I got...100,000 views on this. And it's like why? There's no value in it.” Her discomfort was affectively marked, as she added: “It feels icky and uncomfortable.”

Such reflections resonate with Grosser's (2014) critique of how capitalist culture fosters a pervasive ‘desire for more’, particularly through the logics of quantification. Grosser argues that in the platform economy, personal worth is increasingly measured through quantifiable indicators. He goes on to say that social media platforms encourage users to reimagine both themselves and their relationships in numerical terms, fostering what he describes as a self-induced audit culture. In this

context, the desire for more - more likes, more followers, more reach - becomes an affective and moral imperative, one that many participants described as exhausting or uncomfortable. Phoebe's comment that a post with 100,000 views but "no value...feels icky and uncomfortable," or Alison's reflection on no longer "panicking" about numbers, illustrate how participants developed scepticism toward quantification and high-volume metrics over time. These examples suggest a reorientation away from the imperative to accumulate, and toward metrics that felt more meaningful or sustainable in the context of their work.

For many participants, orientating themselves away from vanity metrics was also about staying grounded and holding on to what felt "sane" and "meaningful" in the face of platform volatility. As Erica, a Business Consultant, put it:

"It's a vanity number because the sanity is that it doesn't get in front of as many people as my other page that's got a thousand people on it."

Erica had two Facebook Pages, one for her Business Consultancy, which had been established for a number of years, and one for a newer business which is focused on nutrition education and support. Here she is reflecting on the sudden decline of her larger page, explaining:

"My 11,000 [Facebook Page] doesn't do as well as my thousand [Facebook Page], and it literally fell off a cliff. It's not like over time people stopped following it or stopped engaging. It went down."

Her distinction between vanity and sanity points to what I describe as a protective orientation; a refusal to let surface-level metrics define success in ways that feel unstable, unearned, or disconnected from lived experience. Resisting vanity metrics, in this context, becomes a form of strategic self-preservation, grounded in what feels tangible, relational, and real. This protective orientation can be understood as part of the broader affective negotiation of algorithmic vibes. Participants adjusted their orientations by tuning into what still felt stable, meaningful, and aligned with their values, rather than reacting, in-the-moment, to every fluctuation in visibility or reach. In this way, protective orientations emerge in response to the volatility of platform feedback, allowing participants to remain attuned to platform logics without being overwhelmed or governed by them.

Protective orientations were not limited to participants who lacked confidence or skills in data interpretation. Erica for example had been using social media for many years and was comfortable navigating the analytics dashboards on her social media accounts. Similarly, Laura, a Career Coach who works primarily with young women who are seeking support to help them develop their career or transition to a different career, developed a protective orientation in response to a feeling of disillusionment, which led her to conclude that analytical skill does not guarantee insight or consistency on social media platforms. Laura has a strong background in evaluation; in fact she describes herself as “someone who lives and breathes evaluation” when working in the part-time paid roles she has alongside self-employment. Yet, her orientation towards social media metrics, and the algorithmic logics behind them, had evolved over time. As she put it, she now “cares less” about metrics compared to when she first started using social media to market her business. Although she felt well equipped to analyse platform data, she described the process as ultimately unsatisfying:

“Even for someone who lives and breathes evaluation it's somewhat fruitless in that...you can think that you're changing something and it'll land really well and...it just doesn't...There's that...lack of consistency...I'm going to change this and that's 100% going to grow, and then it won't.”

While Laura continued to rely on evaluation in other areas of her business, particularly email marketing, she viewed social media analytics as “somewhat fruitless” and unreliable due to platforms’ unpredictable handling of visibility. Consequently, she adjusted her marketing practices to reduce her dependence on social media for revenue generation, focusing instead on her business website and email marketing. This reorientation also altered her approach to data:

“It's not as structured as checking once a month and having that time to reflect on it, it's just yeah getting a bit of a sense of that's working, that's not, but doing that very ad hoc.”

Laura’s description of “getting a bit of a sense of that’s working, that’s not” illustrates a form of algorithmic sense-making that resists routinized evaluation. Her approach

reflects a recalibration of attention based on accumulated familiarity with platform instability and a felt sense of what is working.

Laura's algorithmic sense-making is also closely entangled with her social media practices, which now centre on a trial-and-error approach, as she explained:

"You kind of got a gist of what would work so you did more of that but then again the algorithm will change and it'll stop suddenly overnight, so you just kind of have to react as they change things, rather than you working off your stats and it being consistent and you being able to implement something and knowing that it will work."

In Laura's case, algorithmic vibes were constructed through a combination of intuitive orientation and speculative interpretation. Her sense of what was "working" on the platform emerged through a felt "gist" - an affective sense drawn from past experience and ongoing observation. At the same time, she was acutely aware of the volatility and opacity of platform logics, noting that what once appeared effective could "stop suddenly overnight." This perceived instability meant that her orientation toward platform algorithms was necessarily reactive and adaptive. Because she could not reliably determine what had changed or why certain content formats lost traction, speculation became a key part of her sense-making. In this way, Laura's algorithmic vibes were continually reconstructed in response to platform shifts, grounded in a speculative, affectively attuned relationship with visibility.

Laura's account reflects a broader pattern among participants, many of whom questioned the value of analysing social media metrics in order to make sense of platform algorithms. Participants described a sense that the opacity of algorithms, combined with frequent and unpredictable changes, undermined the usefulness of data analysis as a mode of algorithmic sense-making. This is reflective of algorithmic precarity, a term which Duffy et al. (2020) use to refer to the inherent instability of algorithms, and the uncertainty this generates for those who rely on them for work. For the everyday women entrepreneurs in this study, algorithmic precarity was experienced affectively, producing feelings of frustration, disorientation, and in some cases, resignation. While Duffy et al. (2020) conclude that "cultural

workers amid platformization are only as good as their knowledge of the algorithm” (p. 5), I argue that the women in my study did not share this view, and neither do I. Despite their dependence on social media visibility, most participants placed limited value on attempts to decode the algorithm, seeing such efforts as draining and increasingly unproductive.

Alison, the Visual Impact Specialist I introduced earlier, described what she perceived as a broader shift among small business owners, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic:

“If we took it like maybe three years ago, before [the] pandemic, I think it was a big conversation with small businesses - trying to find what works, trying to copy one another...but I don't think it's as prevalent now.”

Alison's reflection suggests a waning investment in collective sense-making about the algorithm, a move away from the type of “algorithmic gossip” observed by Bishop (2019) in her study of YouTube content creators. Alison suggested that small business owners now tend to accept the algorithm as opaque and unchangeable - “it is what it is” - and orient themselves accordingly, through strategies of partial withdrawal and resistance, and pragmatic adaptation.

Beyond the unpredictability of outcomes, algorithmic precarity also gave rise to negative feelings that contributed to participants' growing ambivalence toward algorithmic sense-making. Many described feelings of frustration, disappointment, and discouragement, particularly when metrics reminded them that visibility was no longer guaranteed, even among their own followers. Participants were disheartened by the knowledge that, because social media platforms are governed by recommendation algorithms, only a small fraction of their audience might see a given post, despite having opted in to follow their account. These negative feelings were compounded by the opacity and instability of platform systems, which left participants feeling limited in their ability to take a proactive or informed approach to improving their metrics.

Melissa, the Embroider I introduced in Chapter Five, articulated the affective strain shared by many:

“You know what algorithms are like, they change, they change on the flip of a dime. It's, you know, you can't audit, you can't win it, you can't, you don't know how it works but it can be frustrating if you're trying to build up that audience and then TikTok just does something to change the algorithm or change what people get to see and what else, and then you say oh that's actually really quite frustrating.”

Melissa's account encapsulates the emotional toll of algorithmic opacity, not only the difficulty of understanding what the platform wants, but the sense that such knowledge may be unattainable, making visibility feel arbitrary, and efforts to improve metrics feel futile. As a result, many participants either disengaged from metrics altogether or engaged with them more selectively. For these participants, constructing algorithmic vibes, as a form of sense-making, was a way to manage or minimise the negative emotions often triggered by metric fluctuations. Astrologer Phoebe came to the conclusion that:

“It's really weird because somebody like me who loves data is actually basing success on feel now and that's really weird and nice and it feels softer and gentler and it's a lot less pressure because the numbers thing is is always a game that you keep changing the goal posts and never seem to win”.

Phoebe's reflection suggests a shift toward a different kind of data literacy and sense-making, which is grounded in intuition, affect, and experience. As Frank et al. (2016) argue, dominant models of data literacy have often assumed that users engage with data in rational, individualised, and technically proficient ways, overlooking the affective, contextual, and social conditions under which data is encountered and made meaningful. For Phoebe, working with algorithmic vibes provides a way to remain attuned to platform feedback without becoming consumed by the volatility and pressure she previously experienced when attempting to engage with metrics through structured analysis and data dashboards.

Other participants expressed similar concerns. For Dance Teacher Elizabeth, limiting engagement with analytics dashboards helped her avoid the negative

feelings triggered by exposure to data, especially its visual presentation. Elizabeth described how data visualisations in Meta Business Suite could provoke feelings of anxiety and pressure:

“I think sometimes seeing the big red, reach down, likes down, whatever, can be a bit - oh god, I need to do this, this, this and this. And I think that puts you in... that whips you up into a bit of a frenzy where you're like scrambling around for content. When that's never good. Better to post nothing than post something you know you're not really behind fully.”

Elizabeth's reaction reflects the emotional consequences of what has been described as audit culture, a system in which individuals are encouraged to monitor, measure, and optimise their performance through data (Shore and Wright 2015). In this context, platform dashboards function not only as tools of evaluation, but also as instruments of affective governance, shaping how users feel about their success or failure, productivity, and self-worth by mediating how performance is visualised and experienced through data. As Kennedy and Hill (2018) argue, data visualisations are not emotionally neutral. Rather, they provoke strong feelings, shape users' orientations, and inform how individuals understand and narrate their own success. For example, participants often described affective reactions to the visual elements of analytics dashboards, such as line graphs and colour-coded arrows (see example in Figure 11), both because they appeared easy to interpret, and because they evoked immediate emotional reactions, from reassurance to anxiety or pressure. To manage this, Elizabeth explained that relying instead on “vibes”, a term she used specifically, allowed her to adopt a more relaxed approach and pay less attention to analytics dashboards. For her, vibes offered an alternative mode of evaluation and sense-making that helped buffer against the intensity of visualised feedback and the pressures of constant optimisation.

Elizabeth's account also highlights how the ability to evaluate performance based on a sense or vibe was not a given, but something that, for some, developed through years of experience. Her shift from formal tracking - “noting down statistics” and reviewing Facebook Insights daily - to a more relaxed, intuitive form of sense-making reflects both her accumulated experience and her desire to reduce the emotional

and time demands of constant optimisation. For Elizabeth, algorithmic vibes are not divorced from data, but assembled through informal signals such as increased notifications, direct messages, and customer emails, which she interpreted as signs of engagement and visibility without needing to consult analytics dashboards. As Elizabeth put it, “you just get a vibe and a sense of what’s going on.”

This progression can be understood through Bourdieu’s (1990) concepts of habitus and practical mastery, which I introduced in Chapter Three (Theoretical Framework). Elizabeth’s past experiences of using social media for business shaped a set of embodied dispositions - her habitus - that structured how she perceived, prioritised, and responded to feedback on visibility and engagement. These dispositions were not static but refined over time through repeated interaction with platform systems. Her current approach reflects practical mastery: the ability to make sense of algorithmic logics intuitively and responsively, without needing to consciously track or analyse every data point. In other words, Elizabeth has developed, what Bourdieu describes as, a ‘feel for the game’; a mode of action grounded in past practice and attuned to platform logics. In this case then, the construction of algorithmic vibes is rooted in embodied familiarity with business practices, audience cues, and the labour of self-presentation.

6.6 Aspirational Orientations: Data, Discipline, and the Promise of Access

While many participants adopted protective orientations and sought to buffer themselves from the emotional volatility of platform metrics, this experience was not universal. For participants using platforms with built-in monetisation programmes, such as YouTube, metric engagement often remained central to their practices. In these cases, metrics held increased importance because they are thresholds for accessing income. Kimberley, the Founder of a Murder Mystery Game business and Creator of True Crime content who I introduced in Chapter Five, is both an everyday entrepreneur and a content creator actively pursuing monetisation on YouTube. She was seeking not only visibility, but also the opportunity to earn money directly from the platform. As such, she engaged in what Duffy (2015) describes as aspirational labour - sustained, unpaid, and visibility-driven work aimed at future reward. In this

context, YouTube's monetisation policy, which requires creators to have "1,000 subscribers with 4,000 valid public watch hours in the last 12 months" (YouTube, 2024a), became a structuring force in Kimberley's visibility strategy. As Caplan and Gillespie (2020) argue, such metrics function not simply as signals of audience engagement, but as thresholds of eligibility within a tiered governance system, where different creators are granted different opportunities, resources, and protections. Kimberley's efforts to track and optimise subscriber growth, retention, and watch time were aligned with platform-defined terms of labour and compensation. Kimberley described this as follows:

"So I have a metrics tracker. For YouTube, I track things like whether it's subscribers or new people who are watching the content. Am I attracting my crowd back? At the moment I'm at 54% with them. So I'm really pleased with that. Obviously, because I'm in that push to monetization, subscribers are important. How long they're watching a video, retention time, because that matters with the ad revenue, because the longer you keep them, the more you're paid."

YouTube's monetisation infrastructure plays a key role in shaping creators' relationships with data. By setting clear performance thresholds for monetisation and actively encouraging analytic engagement (see YouTube 2024b), the platform structures what creators should aspire to and how they should monitor their own progress. In Kimberley's case, the opportunity to earn additional income directly from the platform, combined with extensive guidance and available metrics, encouraged her to make active and consistent use of YouTube analytics. In contrast, her use of Instagram analytics is more limited. She perceived less control over outcomes on Instagram and framed her strategy there as more speculative than anticipatory: "putting out content and hoping it does well." This comparison illustrates how platform infrastructure and governance, including the clarity of metrics and promised rewards, shape the perceived value of metric engagement.

Relatedly, Kimberley invested time into accessing resources provided in the official TikTok Academy in order to understand the requirements for opening a TikTok Shop, which would allow her to sell products directly through the platform. While her engagement was monetisation-focused, other participants approached TikTok's

commercial infrastructure more cautiously or opportunistically. For example, Embroider Melissa, who I introduced earlier, signed up for a TikTok Shop account not to actively sell products, but because doing so granted her access to the platform's "live" feature, bypassing the usual 1,000-follower threshold. TikTok Live "allows viewers and creators to interact [with live video broadcasts] in real time" (TikTok 2025). Melissa listed a small number of products but did not use the Shop function to drive sales, only listing products to gain access to broadcast TikTok Live. In this instance, her practice was guided by platform-defined thresholds, by which I mean metrics that are used to gatekeep access to particular platform affordances.

Melissa also used the TikTok dashboard to review performance data, but her engagement with metrics was selective and intuitive. She explained that although TikTok provides a range of detailed insights, including views, watch time, likes, shares, and saves, she chose to focus only on a few key metrics. In her words:

"When you go onto your dashboard... you can see all your insights, so it kind of...breaks it down to viewed, watched, saved, shared...There are more in-depth information as you scroll down...but I've not really ever looked at it. I tend to just look at the views and how many people have either shared or saved it, because obviously saving a video is...quite important because it means...that person will probably come back to that video

This quote shows that Melissa's approach to data was pragmatic, as she attended to the metrics that felt most relevant to her work and those that were most easily understood in terms of customer engagement and intent. For example, she associated video saves with a viewer's potential future interest in a product. As she put it later in the interview:

"If you get that sense of what is working and what's not, that's the main thing to start with. You can get totally lost, can't you...that dashboard gives you so much information?"

Her comment reflects a conscious filtering of data, shaped by a desire to avoid overwhelm and manage her time efficiently. In this way, Melissa's engagement with metrics exemplifies algorithmic vibes as a speculation and anticipatory orientation to

what feels significant and useful, based on her understanding of platform logics and audience practices.

Finally, Melissa's reflections on TikTok's product approval process illustrate how data engagement extends beyond dashboards to include speculative interpretation of platform governance. She described how she tried to anticipate whether certain keywords in her product listings might trigger rejection:

"I'm assuming that when it goes off for approval... whoever it is, whether it's done manually or whether it's done electronically, I don't know... they might just have keyword searches and make sure that you don't go down that road."

Her uncertainty, captured in phrases like "I'm assuming," "whoever it is," and "I don't know", highlights the affective uncertainty and partial knowledge that characterise participants' experiences of platform governance. Together, Melissa's selective metric use and speculative sense-making demonstrate how algorithmic vibes are constructed in response to platform opacity and the felt limits of knowability.

In addition, the examples of Melissa and Kimberley illustrate how some participants paid attention to metrics not only to monitor their platform visibility and engagement rates, but also to anticipate the implications of metrics for platform access. Drawing on Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power - a form of governance that operates through internalised norms and self-regulation rather than direct enforcement - Chan (2022) argues that metrics exert control by prompting users to adjust their practices in anticipation of potential consequences. In this context, metrics operate not only as retrospective indicators of performance, but as forward-looking signals that encourage self-surveillance and strategic compliance with platform logics. In her study of gig workers on delivery, ride-hailing and domestic services platforms in the US, Chan (2022) shows how individuals modify their behaviour in anticipation of how metrics might influence their ratings, opportunities, or access to future work. While the women in my study are situated differently, as everyday entrepreneurs rather than gig workers, a similar dynamic was evident in their engagements with platform metrics. Kimberley and Melissa both adapted their practices based on what they believed platforms were measuring, and

how those measurements might unlock or restrict future forms of participation (participation in a monetisation programme and the ability to do live broadcasts respectively).

In this way, algorithmic vibes were constructed in response to participants' affective responses to platform feedback and their anticipatory orientations toward platform governance. Multiple factors contribute to this algorithmic sense-making, including participants' expectations, speculations, and intuitions about how platforms might respond to their content, actions, or visibility in the future, both in terms of access to monetisable affordances and in relation to forms of disciplinary control and governance. These anticipatory vibes are constructed in conditions of opacity and uncertainty, where understanding of algorithmic logics and platform governance is limited. In this sense, algorithmic vibes are not merely reactive or retrospective, but also projective and pre-emptive. They are constructed based on a felt sense of how to remain in alignment with platform logics, even when those logics were obscure or unstable.

6.7 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have argued that social media metrics are affectively charged signals that are encountered, interpreted, and lived with in diverse ways. For everyday women entrepreneurs, metrics formed part of their broader algorithmic sense-making, which was shaped by their feelings and orientations toward feedback, practice constraints, such as time and skill, and the anticipatory demands of platform governance. Participants developed speculative and anticipatory orientations to dashboards or numeric metrics. Together, I have conceptualised these as algorithmic vibes, which play a central role as participants seek to make sense of what platforms appear to reward, suppress, or ignore.

Platforms foreground specific forms of data through dashboards and curated feedback, such as notifications and achievement badges. Some participants engaged with these metrics and platform notifications selectively based on how particular signals made them feel, and seemed important based on their business goals. These approaches to sense-making, which aligned with the intuitive and

affective orientations outlined in Chapter Five, were often speculative and anticipatory. In this sense, participants constructed algorithmic vibes through a felt sense of what might be working, what could be rewarded, or what seemed to resonate.

For many, visible forms of engagement with their content, particularly comments and Direct Messages (DMs), functioned as relational signals that were felt to be more meaningful than platform-curated metrics like reach or views. In this context, success was defined by most participants in terms of connection and resonance, more so than volume. Participants' practices of data tracking and evaluation revealed both pragmatic engagement and affective ambivalence, shaped by their skills to decode metrics (Kennedy and Hill 2018), their goals, and their experiences of platform volatility.

Some participants developed protective strategies to mitigate the practical and emotional demands of metric fluctuations. For some, this involved partial disengagement, such as avoiding dashboards and only looking at metrics at a post-level, or restricting how often they checked their metrics. Many engaged in a redefinition of success, prioritising comments or community resonance over reach or likes. However, there were some participants who described more structured engagement with analytics and thresholds, which was often shaped by aspirational labour (Duffy 2015) as they were seeking platform monetisation or commercial affordances.

These findings extend the concept of algorithmic vibes by demonstrating how speculative and anticipatory orientations combine with the intuitive and affective orientations described in Chapter Five. In this chapter, algorithmic vibes were constructed through participant's efforts to anticipate platform logics, speculate on what might be rewarded in future, and adapt accordingly. These orientations were developed through selective attention to metrics, habitual practices of evaluation, and interpretive engagement with platform signals that often lacked clarity or consistency. As such, I argue that algorithmic vibes are entangled with metric feedback, lived experiences of algorithmic precarity, and mechanisms of platform governance.

These findings contribute to addressing the research questions of this study. For example, in response to the question, how do everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms on a range of social media platforms?, I argue that it was common for participants to engage with platform metrics selectively, filtering data through personal goals, affective responses, and intuitive understandings of platform logics. They made sense of algorithms through informal impressions, speculative interpretation, and affective feedback mechanisms such as comments, DMs, and visible fluctuations in engagement, all of which functioned as partial, often ambiguous signals of algorithmic logics.

In response to my second research question: What is the nature of the relationship between everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and their social media practices?, I argue that participants' interpretation of metrics was inseparable from their everyday social media practices. Sense-making was enacted through tracking spreadsheets, exploratory engagement with platform interfaces, and affective responses to platform feedback and data visualisations. These practices were shaped by past experience, availability of time and skill, and participants' affective capacity to navigate the demands of visibility. Participants adjusted their practices in response to patterns they sensed rather than fully understood.

In response to my third research question, about the differences that exist amongst different everyday women entrepreneurs' in terms of their algorithmic sense-making and social media practices, I argue that participants exhibited markedly different orientations toward metrics, and therefore towards platform algorithms. Some participants, such as Kimberley who was working towards reaching YouTube's monetisation threshold, developed structured routines for tracking and evaluating data. Others such as Elizabeth, who had been in business for a number of years, limited her engagement with platform metrics and preferred to feel her way through platforms in order to avoid feelings of anxiety. There were other participants, like Hulwi who focused on the content of comments and Direct Messages (DMs) she received from her audience rather than numerical metrics, who disengaged from metrics based on uncertainty about their meaning and value. These differences reflect not only variation in skill or interest, but also affective capacity and orientations toward labour, risk, and sustainability.

Finally, in relation to my final research question about the relationship between platform structures and logics and the algorithmic sense-making and social media practices of everyday women entrepreneurs, I argue that participants' engagements with metrics were shaped by platform infrastructures that privilege quantification, performance feedback, and commercial thresholds. For those engaging with features like YouTube monetisation or TikTok Shops, metrics functioned as disciplinary thresholds that governed access to visibility and income. Even where participants resisted or questioned the value of metrics, their practices remained oriented by what platforms made legible and actionable. These findings suggest that algorithmic vibes are also anticipatory orientations to platform governance, constructed in response to what platforms incentivise, obscure, or penalise.

In conclusion, through the concept of algorithmic vibes, and building on the work of scholars such as Kennedy and Hill (2018), Zheng (2024) and Cotter (2019), I have argued that data is felt and lived with. It is also situated within broader affective negotiations of platform governance, entrepreneurial practice, and the pursuit of sustainable visibility. Through this chapter I extend my conceptualisation of algorithmic vibes by foregrounding how platform feedback contributes to the construction of speculative and anticipatory orientations to algorithms. Whilst existing research into entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making (such as Cotter 2019) tends to focus on identifiable strategies or stable orientations to metrics and algorithms, this chapter has shown that participants' engagements with data were often non-linear and contingent; they shifted depending on how participants felt, what they sensed the platform was rewarding, and what was viable in light of their current goals, energy, or priorities. These orientations were not only different between participants, but also within them, since the same individual might closely monitor their analytics during one phase of their work, and at another time choose to disengage from metrics or act in more intuitive, less data-driven ways. Algorithmic vibes, then, are dynamic constructions formed through repeated engagement, felt feedback, and the everyday negotiations of visibility in platform environments.

In the next chapter, I turn to the role of difference and inequality in algorithmic sense-making, examining how social position, economic resources, and platform

infrastructures intersect to shape inequalities in who can 'feel their way' through algorithmic systems, and at what cost.

Chapter Seven: Algorithmic Sense-Making and the Uneven Terrain of Digital Entrepreneurship

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that the challenges women entrepreneurs face in terms of algorithmic sense-making on social media platforms are experienced unevenly. Differences between participants are sometimes connected to intersecting characteristics and inequalities such as financial resources, ethnicity, culture, gender, education, professional experience, caring and domestic responsibilities, health and dis/ability, and access to support. However, divergences in algorithmic sense-making and practice do not always map predictably onto these categories. Some reflect personal values, preferences, or affective responses that cannot be systematically accounted for, yet still play a significant role in how participants navigate platform conditions. The concept of algorithmic vibes helps to explain this by directing attention to how different orientations are constructed through the interplay of structural inequalities, habitus, and the ways social and economic conditions are felt and navigated in everyday practice. Algorithmic vibes clarifies how participants' orientations toward platform algorithms are influenced by how particular practices feel to them, and by how visibility itself is experienced, whether as motivating, rewarding, unsettling, or frustrating, helping to explain why women in similar social or economic positions sometimes developed divergent ways of making sense of platform algorithms.

I have highlighted some of the differences between participants' algorithmic sense-making practices in Chapter Five and Six, making clear that everyday entrepreneurship on digital platforms is not a universal experience for all women entrepreneurs. In this chapter, I build on earlier discussions to examine more directly how gendered and intersectional inequalities shape the algorithmic sense-making and platform practices of everyday women entrepreneurs.

In Chapter Five, I introduced the concept of ‘algorithmic vibes’ to describe the affective and intuitive orientations that everyday women entrepreneurs develop in response to shifting platform dynamics. Chapter Six extended this analysis by exploring how social media data, particularly in the form of metrics and platform feedback mechanisms, shape participants’ felt experiences of value, legitimacy, and visibility, and how these are negotiated in relation to their goals and orientations. In this chapter, I build on those foundations to examine how these orientations relate to broader inequalities. By focusing on how algorithmic sense-making differs amongst everyday women entrepreneurs, I directly address my third research question, which asks: What differences, if any, exist amongst different everyday women entrepreneurs’ algorithmic sense-making and social media practices?

Differences are evident in the ways participants make sense of algorithms (RQ1), and also in the relationship this algorithmic sense-making has with their social media practices (RQ2). This includes variations in awareness and understanding, affective orientation, levels of certainty or confidence, and the perceived viability of particular platform practices. While some participants articulated algorithmic vibes as hopeful and enabling, others described feelings of marginalisation, disillusionment, or opacity. My findings suggest that while demographic categories such as gender, race, and economic resources are important, they do not fully account for the diversity of ways in which participants construct meaning around algorithms and platform practices. Even among participants with seemingly similar cultural, educational, or economic backgrounds, personal circumstances, or business goals, significant differences in sense-making were evident. This chapter demonstrates that algorithmic vibes are constructed in situated ways, sometimes entangled with structural inequalities and at other times reflecting differences that resist straightforward explanation.

I also argue that the varied experiences of women entrepreneurs on social media cannot be explained through deficit models that frame women as lacking the necessary skills or dispositions for success (Marlow 2020). As discussed in Chapter Three (Literature Review), critiques of the makeover paradigm in enterprise policy (Ahl and Marlow 2021) highlight how women are often positioned as in need of transformation. Within this framing, women entrepreneurs’ perceived

underperformance is attributed to individual failings, such as a lack of confidence, assertiveness, or risk tolerance. Women are therefore encouraged to adopt behaviours, skills, and styles of self-presentation aligned with an idealised masculine entrepreneurial subject (Martinez Dy and Jayawarna 2020). Such models sideline the complex structural, cultural, and affective conditions that contribute to women's varied experiences, and instead position gendered difference as a deficit to be overcome through individual adaptation.

These ideas form part of a wider meritocratic ethos in digital entrepreneurship discourse, which suggests that access to platforms and digital tools can "level the playing field" (Davidson and Vaast 2010; Best et al. 2025). However, such discourses obscure how platform structures, algorithmic governance, and social inequalities shape who becomes visible, how visibility is achieved, and what forms of entrepreneurial labour are recognised and rewarded. In this chapter, I examine how participants' constructions of algorithmic vibes reveal the uneven conditions under which visibility is pursued, experienced, and made sense of.

Earlier in the thesis (Chapters Five and Six) I highlighted how differences in algorithmic sense-making are shaped by affective orientations, that is, the intuitive, felt and, embodied ways participants attune to algorithmic logics and platform dynamics. I have also shown how algorithmic sense-making is shaped by embodied dispositions, or *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990), and ways of making sense that individuals develop through their social, cultural, and economic positioning. In this chapter, I build on these foundations by examining how participants' orientations are situated within broader social and structural inequalities, including uneven gendered pressures around authenticity and visibility, differential access to financial resources, and cultural, religious, and professional identity. Together, these conditions contribute to unequal experiences of visibility, legitimacy, and participation within algorithmically governed platforms.

I begin by examining the gendered risks and affective costs of visibility, as these dynamics offer an important starting point for understanding difference. Visibility is not equally available or desirable to all (Duffy & Hund 2019), and for many participants it involved negotiating discomfort, vulnerability and exposure to scrutiny

or harassment. These experiences shaped how participants made sense of platform norms and logics of visibility, and influenced their capacity to sustain a visible presence online. Next I discuss how access to financial resources informs participants' orientations and practices in shaping their capacity to pursue visibility, experiment with platform strategies, and manage periods of algorithmic volatility. I focus on four interrelated areas where financial resources affected participants' algorithmic sense-making and social media practices: formal training, structured peer support, paid advertising, and the ability to sustain periods of low visibility. I separate these not to suggest they operate independently, but to highlight how different forms of access interact with participants' orientations and practices, contributing to differentiated experiences of platform visibility. Following this, I examine differences in when and how participants engaged in algorithmic sense-making, highlighting how some participants limited their engagement based on what felt worthwhile, while others felt compelled to remain continually responsive to platform logics. The next section considers time, care, and the everyday constraints of algorithmic sense-making, showing how the demands of running a business and managing caregiving responsibilities limited some participants' availability to engage in sense-making and remain consistently visible. Finally, I explore uneven experiences of "fitting in" on social media, focusing on how participants felt and engaged with dominant platform norms around content formats and self-presentation. Across these sections, I argue that algorithmic vibes are constructed in uneven and context-specific ways, sometimes entangled with structural inequalities, and at other times reflecting differences grounded in personal values, lived experience, or affective responses that resist straightforward explanation.

7.2 Gendered Risks and the Affective Costs of Visibility

In this section, I introduce Rachel, a Property Portfolio Builder, Suzanne, a Dog Groomer, Lily, an Outsourcing Specialist, and Phoebe, an Astrologer, and discuss their accounts of algorithmic sense-making and visibility practices. Their experiences illustrate how algorithmic sense-making is not only economically and culturally shaped but also characterised by conditions of risks, scrutiny, and emotional strain that are often felt acutely by women. This section foregrounds

differences in the affective costs of platform labour, particularly for those whose professional identity, appearance, or values do not neatly align with dominant expectations of self-presentation and success within digital entrepreneurship.

Dynamics of scrutiny and risk are particularly evident in Rachel's account, where the pressures of visual self-presentation and expectations of authenticity intersect with gendered norms of professionalism and online visibility. Rachel is a White and Black Caribbean, 34 year old Property Portfolio Builder who helps people invest in property and assists with renovations and property letting. She has a University degree and a background in marketing. She has two children, ages 7 and 8, and a total household income in the £70,000 to £99,999 bracket.

When talking about producing and sharing video content, Rachel shared the following:

“It's probably like getting over those excuses that hold you back. I need to wash my hair before I do a video. I need to put some makeup on or I need to tidy up the room and have everything looking perfect. Like actually you don't. And I think the people who do well from video and stuff, they are just like being themselves, sometimes like laid in bed, like just talking to the camera. I think people appreciate that. But it's.... Yeah, getting out of my own way and just doing it.”

Rachel's phrase “getting out of my own way and just doing it” suggests a form of self-discipline and internalisation of platform norms, as she actively works to suppress her own discomfort in order to conform with what she feels is expected. She also acknowledges unspoken pressures to present a polished, aesthetically curated version of herself, saying things like; “I need to wash my hair,” or “I need to tidy up the room”. These initial hesitations reflect traditional feminine self-presentation expectations that align with “normative conventions of feminine self-presentation” (Duffy & Hund 2019, p. 4985). However, rather than simply complying with these expectations, Rachel also demonstrates strategic self-presentation (Caldeira, De Ridder, & Van Bauwel 2020), as she assesses different visibility strategies, recognising the pressure to appear polished whilst also

acknowledging that successful creators often adopt a more casual, seemingly effortless style.

When I asked Rachel what success means to her, she replied:

"I want to come across as being trustworthy. I want people to see that in me so that, you know, if people are seeing my posts and getting to know me, and they trust in me, then that leads to my business being successful."

For Rachel, the most important aspect of social media visibility is not just about being seen, but about fostering trust. She is mindful of presenting herself in a way that balances authenticity with professionalism, emphasising the importance of trust in building long-term business relationships. In her view, a polished, curated presentation of herself could lead to success, but only if it conveyed genuineness to her audience. This focus on trustworthiness aligns with Duffy and Hund's (2019) concept of the "authenticity bind," which highlights the delicate balance women must strike between being relatable and accessible to foster trust, while maintaining a professional image to sustain credibility. Duffy and Hund (2019) argue that women social media influencers, on platforms like Instagram, must share intimate, personal moments to appear relatable, while also conforming to normative conventions of feminine self-presentation, balancing the need to appear polished and professional with the pressure to be authentic and real. In this way, algorithmic sense-making is intertwined with gendered expectations of how women should present themselves in digital spaces.

Furthermore, Duffy and Hund (2019) argue that negotiating the authenticity bind can not only result in internal tension but also external criticism and harassment. Rachel's account is suggestive of this, as she shared her experience of being subjected to trolling and negative comments, which she perceives as part of the challenge of maintaining a visible, relatable presence online:

"I have had quite a lot of trolls and I think that's part of it. They've never necessarily said it's because I'm a woman. But I think sometimes the way, like particularly men, will speak or type to reply to people's posts can, you know, it's insulting. And I think it is part... they wouldn't talk to a man like

that. So it'll be on things like I'll voice my opinion on what the property market is doing and then people come on and basically say that that's ridiculous. Or they'll, you know, I'll post some property figures that like my ideal clients look for and somebody else will comment on like that's a rubbish, rubbish deal, I won't have that. You know, just like not necessary. Sometimes they do get aggressive, but sometimes it's more just like trying to make you look stupid."

Rachel's account reveals the gendered nature of online harassment, where women are often subject to comments that seek to undermine their authority and question their credibility, particularly when they assert expertise or share opinions (Duffy and Hund 2019). Rachel also highlights the subtle but significant ways in which this harassment often takes place:

"Sometimes they do get aggressive, but sometimes it's more just like trying to make you look stupid. And I think that's probably a popular one that I see towards women. But I do think men will sometimes get that too."

Despite the personal cost of harassment, Rachel reveals a strategic perspective on the situation, noting that negative comments can inadvertently boost engagement:

"But they say you've not made it until you've had someone comment something negative on you. And it all helps with the algorithm. And then you'll get some people sticking up for you."

Her ability to reinterpret this negativity as a tool for increasing visibility speaks to the complexity of negotiating platform visibility within the context of gendered expectations. While these online interactions may challenge her professional credibility and personal security, they also become part of a dynamic interplay where engagement, regardless of its nature, can amplify reach. This reflects the precarious position many women entrepreneurs occupy in the digital space where they must balance personal expression with the external pressures of public scrutiny, all while trying to build and maintain professional credibility (Duffy and Hund 2019; Martinez Dy et al. 2017)..

Suzanne, a Dog Groomer, expressed a more cautious orientation to platform visibility. Suzanne provides mobile dog grooming services, but did not provide any demographic information. She described feeling "self-conscious" on Instagram, particularly when using hashtags which she felt exposed to her a broader audience and could potentially lead to scrutiny of her content and work. This created a delicate balance between wanting to reach the "right" audience and protecting her personal wellbeing. Visibility, while essential for their business, came with risks. For some, difficult experiences online led them to reevaluate their approach to visibility, as in the example of Lily below.

Lily's experience of harassment on social media caused her to retreat and adopt a more cautious, private online presence. Lily is an experienced business owner who has been engaging with social media marketing for more than nine years. She describes herself as an Outsourcing Specialist, working predominantly with female online entrepreneurs to help them "put their business in a good place before they start to outsource". She also provides remote admin and tech support services to entrepreneurs. She did not provide any other details about her background or demographics.

Lily felt that Facebook had developed "a bit of a dirty reputation in terms of unethical practices, of what they were and weren't allowing, or what could and couldn't be advertised". Lily's perception of Facebook as a platform that enables unethical and inaccurate advertising to proliferate had begun to deter her from using the platform when she encountered, what she described as, "a nasty trolling experience". Lily explained to me that a woman had heard her on a radio interview and subsequently approached her via her business' Facebook Page, where she began to harass Lily. The woman in question was then able to find Lily's phone number and address via her website and email newsletters, escalating the harassment. Lily reported the ongoing harassment to the police, but was disappointed and frustrated by the response she received.

"They were most unhelpful and were very much like well we shouldn't be on...social media, kind of thing. What do you expect? Just come off social media... The advice from the police is just, 'well block them', right?

And what do you expect when you put that out there on social media?
Why have you got your address on your website? Well I have to have my
address on my website from the mailing list, the privacy policy.”

Based on this experience and her perception of Facebook’s ‘dirty reputation’ Lily decided to step away from the platform as the risks of being visible there outweighed the benefits. For a period of time, Lily avoided being visible on any social media platform by not posting content, because she felt unsafe to do so. Subsequently, she concentrated her practices on Instagram, telling me:

“Instagram at the time felt like a much nicer place to be. I'd never had any issues on Instagram with people approaching me or being unkind or anything like that. It just felt like a safer space at the time if I'm being honest.”

Ultimately, in Lily’s case, how a platform made her feel while using it was as important as the visibility it offered. For many other participants as well, emotional wellbeing played a decisive role in their choice of platforms, sometimes even outweighing potential business benefits. This underscores that achieving visibility had to be balanced with maintaining personal comfort and boundaries. Astrologer Phoebe, who I introduced in Chapter Five and revisited in Chapter Six, explained to me the profound effect that pursuing visibility on social media had on her, which led her to avoid strategies of visibility ‘at any cost’. Phoebe is a 45 year old White woman, who identifies as English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British. She has a BSC (Hons) Degree, self-employment is her primary source of income, and her total annual household income is in the £40,000 to £49,999 bracket. She has ADHD and identifies as disabled, which she reports affects her ability to carry out her day-to-day activities a little. Prior to her existing astrology business, Phoebe had another business where she worked as a Productivity Coach, to use her term. She told me:

“I've been in online business now for 10 years, and for most of that 10 years, I have found social media to be the thing that has probably impacted my health and mental wellbeing the most out of everything that I

do in my business, because of this reliance on getting it right. And if I don't get it right then it's going to impact my income.”

As the founder of multiple businesses, over the span of a decade Phoebe had spent a great deal of time reflecting on the impact that pursuing online visibility has had on her health and mental wellbeing. Whilst social media was integral to her business growth over the years, she felt that the pressure of ‘getting it right’ had come at a personal cost, leading to periods of overwhelm, frustration and disillusionment. In response, Phoebe often thought about her social media practices, including algorithmic sense-making, in terms of a cost-benefit analysis. For example, she talked of comparing time spent on social media with other revenue-generating activities within her business, saying:

“If I looked at the amount of hours that I put into social media, and I converted that into products, courses, artwork, things, I could sell, my, you know, my product suite, would be enormous if it was transferred from one to the other.”

Despite questioning whether spending more time on product creation and less on social media marketing might produce a better return on investment, Phoebe persevered with social media. Based on her extensive experience, however, she developed firm boundaries that she felt helped her balance business success with personal wellbeing. Consequently, her approach to social media prioritises her wellbeing and happiness over commercial success, leading her to become comfortable disregarding strategies that promise increased visibility but negatively impact her. This attitude was evident in an anecdote Phoebe shared, in which she described moving away from Facebook and only using Instagram:

“Initially when I came away from Facebook and onto Instagram it was because of how toxic Facebook was. It was such a difficult space to be in during Covid and I just found like I was shouting down a deep dark hole. It was pointless and I just, every time I logged on I hated the experience, so I thought well I can't be a presence on there if I absolutely hate logging on to Facebook.”

Recognising that she felt a 'toxic' vibe on the platform and frustration due to lack of visibility, led Phoebe to reflect further on her preferences and capacities relating to social media. Whilst in the short-term she stopped using Facebook altogether, concentrating her efforts instead on Instagram, Phoebe's longer term strategy would be to maintain one primary platform (either Facebook or Instagram) but use platform affordances, namely cross-posting, to have a presence on the other platform. At the time of our first interview, Phoebe had switched back to Facebook and away from Instagram, having become dissatisfied by the visibility she was obtaining on Instagram. This was combined with a dislike of the platform 'vibe', which she described as "people pointing fingers at various things" and pressure to "shout above Reels". In a later conversation, over a year after our first interview, Phoebe told me she had recently reverted to prioritising Instagram, demonstrating how this reflexive process was ongoing based on changing vibes.

Interestingly, during this process of learning and reflection, Phoebe came up with a way to safeguard her wellbeing in the form of 'social media sabbaticals', as she explained:

"I think if it ever gets a bit toxic again I think I'll just take a sabbatical from it, you know, like a full week or a full month of just not...and then come back with renewed energy... And I know there's that fear that if you don't talk on your Facebook for too long then Facebook's just going to abandon you and stuff. But you know, I did pick it up within a matter of weeks when I came back after being away for, I think it was about two years off Facebook business page. And yeah, it takes a little bit of extra work but...it does come back and it wasn't as detrimental as I thought. Everybody thinks that if you don't show up a million times a day, then you will never be seen by anybody and your business will die and everything will be horrendous."

The latter half of this quote sheds light on Phoebe's views about visibility on social media, and the expectation that this should be a constant pursuit for business owners. Whilst she acknowledges that some people fear that periods of inactivity on

social media can be damaging to their business and that, upon returning to social media, extra work is required initially to achieve visibility, in her view the positive consequences for herself and her “tribe” (followers), outweigh the potential costs.

Taken together, the accounts in this section illustrate that algorithmic sense-making is not only unevenly distributed but also deeply gendered. The risks of harassment, the pressures of aesthetic self-presentation, and the emotional toll of maintaining visibility under uncertain platform conditions disproportionately affect women entrepreneurs (Duffy and Hund 2019). These challenges are not simply by-products of individual platform experiences but are entangled with wider cultural expectations around femininity, professionalism, and entrepreneurial success. Algorithmic vibes, as affective orientations to platform logics, are central to how participants navigate these tensions. Participants often had to feel their way through competing demands, learning when to persist, adapt, or withdraw. This underscores that algorithmic sense-making involves not just strategic calculation, but also affective labour, vulnerability, and reflexive negotiation, experiences that are highly gendered and situationally specific.

Having discussed the gendered risks and affective costs of pursuing visibility on social media platforms, I now move on to discuss several forms of difference that were apparent amongst participants and which exemplify the situated nature of algorithmic vibes.

7.3 Financial Access, Social Networks and the Uneven Possibilities of Algorithmic Sense-Making

7.3.1 Formal Training

Two participants, Elizabeth and Hannah, discussed the formal marketing training which they had obtained through Higher Education and Accredited Marketing Qualifications respectively. Elizabeth is the Dance Teacher I discussed in Chapter Five and Six. She is 32 years old and identifies her ethnicity as English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British. She has a disability / long-term health condition but it does not affect her ability to carry out day-to-day activities. Her primary source of

income is self-employment and her total annual household income is £50,000 to £59,999. She has a two year old child and, at the time of our interview, had recently returned to full-time self-employment following maternity leave and a subsequent period of illness. She has a BA(hons) Degree and an International Dance Teachers' Association Licentiate teaching qualification. Elizabeth's Bachelor's Degree in Arts Management introduced her to concepts of marketing and events promotion, which she later applied when transitioning into full-time entrepreneurship.

Hannah, a writer who works with businesses in the funeral industry, had invested in formal marketing training, obtaining a Digital Marketing Institute (DMI) Level 5 Professional Diploma, which provided her with in-depth and structured understanding of social media marketing. She is a 47 year old woman who identifies her ethnicity as English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British. Her primary income is self-employment and her total annual household income is in the £60,000 to £69,999 bracket. She has three children, ages 12, 9 and 7, and she does not identify as disabled. In addition to her DMI Diploma, she has a Masters Degree in an unrelated discipline.

Elizabeth's formal training provided her with familiarity and competence engaging in promotional practices, giving her insight into marketing strategies and the logistical work of business visibility. Although not explicitly focused on social media, her Bachelor's Degree introduced her to ways of thinking about audience engagement, promotion, and strategic communication. In the early years of running her business, she applied this knowledge through deliberate marketing strategies, such as planning content strategically and regularly analysing social media metrics. As discussed in Chapter Five, Elizabeth had not explicitly considered how algorithms affected her platform visibility; a point that highlights the limits of formal marketing training in equipping entrepreneurs to navigate the specific, dynamic logics of algorithmically-governed platforms. Although Elizabeth's training provided a foundation for strategic thinking, it did not necessarily translate into an awareness of algorithmic systems or how they influence visibility on social media. By the time of our interview, her approach had shifted, from concerted algorithmic sense-making and strategic social media practices, to a more intuitive approach to utilising social media. As explored in Chapter Five, she had begun to disengage from metrics,

because they produced feelings of pressure and anxiety. Later in this chapter, I return to Elizabeth's case to show how changes in her personal circumstances further contributed to a more intuitive, affective mode of engagement with social media; one that foregrounds algorithmic vibes over deliberate strategic planning.

Hannah's experience also illustrates the tension between formal training and everyday algorithmic sense-making. Before undertaking her DMI diploma, she described working in a reactive, intuitive way - "just [doing] in the moment what was right" - and noted that the training had helped her feel more able to plan ahead on specific marketing campaigns. However, despite this increased sense of structure, she continued to engage with social media in what she described as an "unconscious" way. Although new clients occasionally found her through LinkedIn, she resisted efforts to optimise her content to improve visibility, by "doing any sort of campaigns". This contrasts with what Gillespie (2014) terms the impulse to become 'algorithmically recognisable': "the powerful and understandable impulse for producers of information to make their content, and themselves, recognizable to an algorithm." (p. 184). As Hannah put it:

"Even if I did...six months of perfect algorithm-led posts, I would still not...get much more than my 10% in the feeds because I would just be competing against too many people who are much better at it."

Her scepticism reflects a recognition of the competitive, saturated nature of social media platforms and a pragmatic reluctance to invest further energy in chasing uncertain algorithmic rewards. Like Elizabeth, Hannah's account demonstrates that having the finances to be able to access formal training may support certain forms of strategic thinking, but it does not guarantee sustained, tactical engagement with the ongoing demands of algorithmic sense-making. Instead, both participants ultimately relied on algorithmic vibes which they constructed through lived experience rather than formal instruction.

This illustrates a key difference: some participants were in a relatively privileged position to invest in formal training and education, which provided a foundation from which they could experiment with strategic approaches to pursuing platform visibility. In contrast, other participants, who I go on to discuss, had no prior experience or

education upon which to build. However, despite these differences in background and approach, most participants ultimately described arriving at a similar place. Whether or not they had received training, their accounts pointed to intuitive, affective, and speculative orientations to platform logics that developed in response to the difficulties of obtaining visibility within an opaque, competitive, and time-pressured environment.

7.3.2 Paying for Training and Access to Peer Support

Only Hannah and Elizabeth had undertaken formal education in marketing. For other participants, it was more common to purchase online courses or coaching programmes offered by independent marketing specialists. These offerings often included access to private support communities, such as Facebook groups, Slack channels or mastermind sessions, where participants could share strategies, frustrations, and insights. In this section, I discuss training and peer support together, as they frequently operate in tandem, forming a composite resource through which participants navigated algorithmic uncertainty and developed their visibility practices.

Elizabeth and Hannah's formal training contrasts with participants who relied on informal learning. Many participants were University-educated or vocationally trained, but their educational backgrounds were typically in their professional fields, such as social care, law and finance, rather than business or marketing. As a result, they often entered self-employment with expertise in their core practice but limited formal training in marketing, and digital visibility strategies specifically.

For example, Suzanne transitioned from working as a dog groomer employed full-time by a pet-care company to running her own mobile grooming business. She had many years of hands-on experience in her grooming practice but she had never received formal marketing training and expressed a lack of familiarity with social media marketing practices. She had a Facebook Page, but made limited use of it and had not posted in over a year, despite recognising that social media could be a valuable tool for attracting new clients and securing bookings. She also demonstrated limited understanding of algorithms, describing algorithms as “the

thing that, like, you most commonly look at". She had some awareness that user engagement, such as people sharing her posts or the use of hashtags, might influence her visibility, saying this would help her "come up" for people interested in dog grooming. Her explanation was non-technical and relied on everyday language, reflecting an emerging understanding that visibility was shaped by how content circulated through social connections. As Suzanne had not engaged with formal training or peer communities, her understanding of visibility remained grounded in everyday social interactions, rather than being shaped by external guidance.

Diane, the Dance Costume Maker I introduced in Five, took a proactive approach to improving her knowledge of digital marketing by engaging with free business training in her local area. Diane, a 35 year old woman who identifies as English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British, was relatively new to business, having entered into self-employment approximately six months before our interview. She has a BA (Hons) Business Law and a BTEC in Fashion. She has a 10 year old son. She has a long-term health condition that affects her ability to carry out day-to-day activities a little. Her primary source of income is self-employment and her total annual household income is in the £20,000 to £29,999 bracket. Diane's household income was supplemented by Universal Credit, as she was only able to work limited hours due to caregiving responsibilities and personal health challenges. Therefore, she depended on free training and guidance accessed through local business networking groups and support funded by a Local Authority initiative. Diane was critical of the quality and variety of free training available, expressing frustration that much of the content was repetitive and of limited practical use. Diane's case highlights how access to business support networks can help mitigate some of the disadvantages of lacking formal marketing expertise, but it also suggests that free training can be inconsistent in quality and effectiveness.

Additionally, Diane's caregiving responsibilities and health constraints limited her ability to fully engage in training opportunities because they reduced the amount of time she could dedicate to paid work. With the limited hours she was able to commit to her business, she had to prioritise paid work over professional development to maintain her income. As a result, although she recognised the value of training and networking for improving her visibility, the pressures of balancing caregiving, health

conditions, and financial stability meant that investing time in learning opportunities was often not feasible. This highlights that access to training is not just about cost but also about the capacity to participate.

Uneven access to training meant that many participants such as Diane and Kimberley, who I introduce shortly, sought out alternative methods to support their algorithmic sense-making. Without the time or financial resources to invest in structured learning, they rely on free content from social media influencers and marketing experts, as well as what Bishop (2019) terms algorithmic gossip - “communally and socially informed theories and strategies” about how algorithms affect platform visibility (p. 2589). These less formal sources provided participants with both explanatory narratives and practical cues for adapting their visibility practices.

Kimberley, is the Founder of a Murder Mystery Game business and Creator of True Crime content, who I discussed in Chapter Five and Six. She has been an entrepreneur for many years, having previously had a successful business selling lingerie and shapewear. She is a 42 year old woman who identifies her ethnicity as English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British. She has a BSc (Hons) degree, her primary source of income is self-employment and her total annual household income is £20,000 to £29,999. She has two children, aged 14 and 12. She does not identify as disabled but shared on the participant information form that she was diagnosed at 41 with inattentive ADHD and identifies as neurodivergent.

Kimberley described learning about algorithmic logics and visibility strategies through free content published by social media experts, alongside a process of trial and error: “I usually go and see what Instagram people who do social media are saying about things and just trial and error, really.” In contrast to Diane, Kimberley was able to invest in low-cost training that included access to consistent peer support. She participated in online co-working and accountability groups through Slack, where she and other entrepreneurs provided mutual support. She was also part of a networking group linked to a business course she had previously completed. In these spaces, Kimberley learnt about experiences of platform visibility from peer conversations, where entrepreneurs shared frustrations and visibility strategies:

“We all moan about those Reels and things like that and how unfair the algorithm is...in that moment...I think I’ve asked for advice and how to get...engagement up.”

Her account illustrates that training and peer support interweave, creating collective spaces for algorithmic sense-making.

In contrast, Farrah’s engagement with peer support reflects a more individualised and strategically focused engagement. Farrah is the Perfume Retailer who I discussed in Chapter Five and Six. She is a 51 year old Asian British - Indian woman who has a Higher National Diploma (HND) in Computing. Her primary source of income is self-employment, although this is mainly generated through the bookkeeping business which she did not wish to focus on in her interview as she uses social media only to market her perfume business. Her annual household income is in the £20,000 to £29,999 bracket. Farrah utilised trial and error to refine her social media strategies, actively experimenting with different content formats and engagement techniques. Farrah embraced experimentation, adjusting her approach based on what she perceived as most effective for her business. However, while she experimented independently with visibility strategies, algorithms and visibility were rarely discussed in the online business support group of which she paid to be a member. Instead, the group focused on developing better understandings of their target market(s) and refining their business offering; practices that, although not directly addressing algorithmic sense-making, can shape how participants frame their content and engage with perceived platform audiences. For Farrah, paid business communities serve as a resource for refining branding and audience targeting, rather than algorithmic sense-making, although this support and training can indirectly aid their algorithmic sense-making by refining their approach to marketing.

The experiences of Farrah and Kimberley suggest that access to paid training and peer support may encourage them to experiment with visibility strategies on social media. In this context, experimentation refers to the ongoing process of testing different content formats and posting strategies in response to platform feedback, of

the type illustrated in Chapter Six. As Cotter (2019) states in her study of Instagram influencers, such experimentation involves iterative adjustments to content, aesthetics, and timing based on perceived platform preferences; a form of strategic calibration aimed at maintaining visibility within shifting algorithmic conditions.

Having guidance, whether through formal courses, one-to-one coaching or access to structured peer support, may reduce uncertainty and offer a clearer framework for experimentation. However, participants still had to invest significant time in testing different strategies and adapting to shifting platform dynamics. Since algorithms change frequently and lack transparency (Bucher 2018), ongoing trial and error remains a necessary part of algorithmic sense-making, regardless of prior training or experience. As with formal training and education, structured support for developing visibility strategies, in the form of training courses or facilitated peer support groups, was a source of difference amongst participants because it sometimes increased a participant's willingness to engage in experimentation.

However, it did not remove the demand for continual adaptation. Finding time to dedicate to such things remained a persistent challenge across different levels of expertise and support. Melissa, the Embroider I discussed in Chapter Five and Six who did not provide any demographic information, outlined her view of this persistent challenge:

“So it’s just that whole process of trial and error and patience. Because again, a lot of people go on to these platforms thinking, right, I’ve got a business, I launched it last night, I need to be famous tomorrow. And we all know growing a business ain’t that easy. It’s really actually quite difficult. I don’t think I’ve ever worked so hard in my life.”

Melissa’s account highlights that algorithmic sense-making for everyday women entrepreneurs is an ongoing demand. It requires persistence, resilience, and a sustained capacity to navigate uncertainty and the affective demands of algorithmic precarity, which I discussed in detail in Chapter Five. Algorithmic precarity refers to the inherent instability of algorithmically-governed platforms and the uncertainty this generates for those who rely on them for work (Duffy et al. 2020). In this context, the

labour of visibility often involves significant time investment and is frequently invisible, unrewarded, and precarious.

The ongoing need for algorithmic sense-making and experimentation is further complicated by the overwhelming volume of advice about social media visibility. Several participants described the challenge of interpreting and navigating information about algorithms and platform visibility from multiple sources, often encountering conflicting information. As a result, they had to invest time in filtering through strategies, determining which approaches aligned best with their specific business model and industry context. Michelle, Sports Massage Therapist, described these challenges:

“So I think, I guess kind of trying to understand what works and what doesn’t work and trying to kind of filter through all of the approaches that people have. Which are probably all valid but they just work for different people, in different industries at different times. And yeah, I think knowing what to listen to and knowing what not to listen to. Or knowing what to cherry pick out that would work for you. Because if you tried to do everything, you’d never post anything.”

Those who paid for training or expert guidance in social media marketing were more likely to prioritise the advice they had invested in. While this did not necessarily mean the paid advice was more accurate or useful than other sources, it helped them narrow their focus and reduce the uncertainty of deciding which strategies to follow.

Jessica, a Health and Wellness Coach, exemplified this. Jessica works with women to help them build confidence and improve their self-esteem, primarily through a one-to-one coaching service. She previously had a business selling and making jewellery. She did not provide any additional demographic information. She described consistently turning to her business coach and associated mastermind group for guidance, explaining: “I go straight to that. She’s like my go-to. That capsule [Facebook Group] has...kept me sane because that’s where we have to go to.” Jessica’s description suggests that having a trusted source of advice allowed her to bypass the need to continually search for and evaluate competing strategies.

She felt able to focus her energy on applying advice she already trusted, rather than spending time navigating multiple, often conflicting, sources of information. Her comment that the group “kept [her] sane” also highlights the affective reassurance it provided. In a context where algorithmic dynamics are often opaque and unpredictable, this sense of stability was itself a valuable resource. The mastermind group functioned as a reliable point of orientation, a space she could consistently return to when navigating uncertainty.

7.3.3 Paid Advertising

Another factor that shaped participants’ algorithmic sense-making was the financial capacity to invest in paid advertising. Most participants relied primarily on trial and error approaches to improve their ‘organic reach’, which is a term used to refer to “non-paid distribution of...content...based on the algorithms and rules of the social media platform” (Later 2025). However, some participants were willing and able to invest in paid advertising on social media platforms. In most of these cases, paid advertising was used as well as, not in place of, free practices that aimed to increase organic reach. Paid advertising on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram typically operates through self-serve interfaces, where users create and manage promotional campaigns directly within the platform (see for example, Meta 2025 and Figure 19). These systems allow business-users to set budgets, define target audiences, choose content formats, and monitor performance metrics in real time. However, making effective use of these tools often requires both financial investment and a degree of digital marketing literacy (Alhabash et al. 2017).

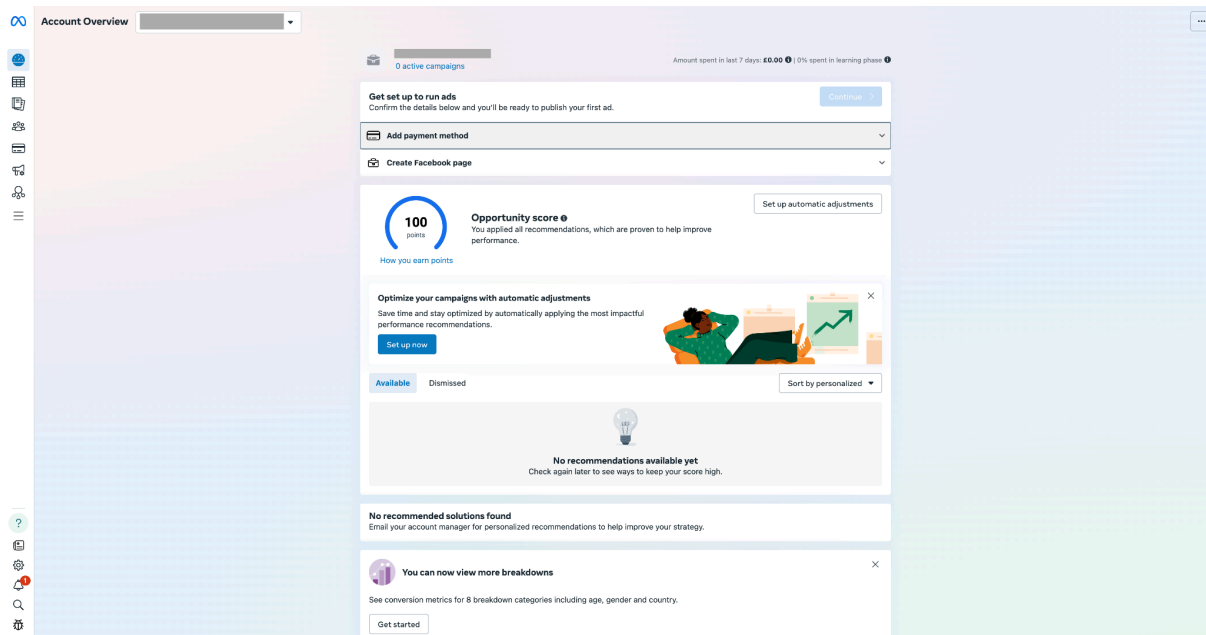


Figure 19: Screenshot of the Account Overview page of Facebook Ads Manager.

Laura, the Career Coach I introduced in Chapter Six, was one of only a few participants who invested in paid advertising, explaining:

“I also have ads that run to my Instagram and on Facebook, actually, even though I’ve decided to stay away from Facebook. I run Insta and Facebook ads to a free download just to generate leads on my email list... it’s been really successful probably for the last six months where the ads have actually been converting.”

Laura is 30 years old and identifies her ethnicity as English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British. She has a Masters Degree in Psychology, and previously worked on a British Military Programme, and for a charity. Her primary source of income is self-employment, and she did not share her total annual household income. She does not have any disability or long-term health condition, and did not disclose whether she has any children under the age of 18.

The ‘free download’ Laura referred to above was a downloadable PDF guide she had created, which users could access in exchange for their email address. This practice, commonly referred to in digital marketing as a lead magnet, is designed to convert platform visibility into more direct forms of audience contact that are not governed by algorithms (MailerLite 2024). Laura’s goal was to increase subscription

to her email list and reduce her reliance on social media visibility. Having the financial resources to run adverts on Facebook, Instagram, and Google Search, allowed her to minimise her use of social media platforms, which she felt required excessive time to obtain organic reach. The focus of her paid advertising strategy was on generating email sign ups which, in the longer-term, would further diminish her reliance on social media.

By contrast, Elizabeth, the Dance Teacher I introduced earlier in this chapter, discussed the financial burden of paying for ads and expressed reluctance to continue investing in paid advertising, citing uncertain returns. Referring to other women entrepreneurs she was familiar with, she commented on a widespread perception that visibility on social media platforms increasingly required financial investment: “People [entrepreneurs] felt they had to pay...to be seen. Pay for the sponsored ads.” Similarly, Fashion Retailer and Interior Designer Vanessa reflected: “I realise you have to market yourself and that takes money, so that...can be tricky.” Vanessa is a 29 year old Black British - African woman. She is University educated, her primary source of income is paid employment and her total annual household income is in the £30,000 to £39,000 bracket. She does not have children under the age of 18. She has a disability / long-term health condition that affects her ability to carry out day-to-day activities a little.

Elizabeth and Vanessa’s comments underscore how having a marketing budget is increasingly perceived as a necessary condition for gaining visibility on social media. However, their orientations diverge. Elizabeth questioned the value of paid advertising based on her past experiences and preferred to pursue lower-cost strategies:

“It’s not something that I’ve done recently, and I don’t think it’s something I intend on doing again. Knowing that I can achieve similar results without paying the money.”

Elizabeth’s account suggests not only financial hesitation but also a resistance to what she perceived as platform-driven monetisation of visibility. Her decision to step back from paid advertising reflects both pragmatic reasoning and a broader

orientation towards sustainable, low-cost approaches to algorithmic sense-making. Her reflections also suggest that algorithmic uncertainty extends to paid advertising. Even when financial investment is possible, the perceived lack of transparency and predictability in how ads perform can deter entrepreneurs from pursuing this route. In this sense, paid promotion is not necessarily experienced as a guaranteed solution to visibility, but as another site of risk within the broader landscape of algorithmic precarity.

Vanessa, the Fashion Retailer and Interior Designer who runs her business alongside full-time employment, acknowledged the potential cost of visibility but did not experience it as an immediate barrier. Her financial stability gave her flexibility to approach marketing on her own terms. Like Vanessa, Summer, the Reiki Master Practitioner I introduced in Chapter Five, also relied on paid employment as her primary source of income, which affords her a level of financial security. Summer has a Higher National Certificate (HNC) in Business and Finance, and certification as a Reiki Master Practitioner. She is 55, and identifies her ethnicity as English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British. Her primary source of income is paid employment. She did not share her total household income nor whether she has any children under 18. Summer opts to set aside a portion of her salary each month to invest in social media advertising for the business she runs alongside her paid employment. This approach was guided by advice she received from her business coach, as she explained:

“She [business coach] gave me some really good pointers, because she...sponsors a lot of her posts...She said you don't have to have a big budget to do it. And I thought actually no you don't...I could set X amount of money out of my paid salary a month to...feed into that.”

Summer took a strategic approach to investing in paid advertising, which involved using social media metrics to identify high-performing posts to boost:

“I look at the stats and I look at what posts where I get the most likes and the most reactions and comments... those are the ones that I would like to focus on with the sponsored stuff... to boost those.”

Summer's full-time job afforded her a level of financial security, and her use of paid advertising in the form of calculated investment in content she has already identified as resonating with her audience. In Chapter Six I introduced the concept of Data Vibes to describe how participants make sense of platform metrics through felt patterns of visibility and response. Summer's approach to paid advertising is shaped by this orientation, as she engages with platform data as a way of identifying what feels successful, and then strategically amplifying that content through advertising. Summer's strategy is one example of how entrepreneurs who have the financial flexibility to experiment can leverage paid advertising strategically, amplifying content that has already gained organic traction. By being highly selective, she felt that even with a small monthly budget she could see an improvement in her platform visibility. Summer's confidence in the effectiveness of Facebook ads was bolstered by the external support she received from her business coach, within the context of a mastermind group.

7.3.4 Ability to Sustain Periods of Low Visibility

Entrepreneurs with multiple income sources or some degree of financial security are better positioned to withstand the uncertainty and instability of social media visibility. They are not as dependent on immediate platform returns, which affords them the flexibility to experiment, sustain periods of low visibility and pursue longer-term strategies. This stands in contrast to participants whose income depends entirely on their online visibility, for whom low engagement can provoke heightened stress, urgency, and economic risk.

Ens and Márton (2024) argue, the 'hustle culture' prevalent in the digital economy, promotes an ethos of relentless work, self-optimisation, and constant risk-taking. This unrelenting pressure to succeed, despite uncertainty and frequent setbacks, takes a toll on entrepreneurs, particularly when they are required to constantly experiment with visibility strategies, often without guaranteed returns. The emotional and financial demands of this hustle culture are particularly taxing for entrepreneurs who lack the resources to absorb the costs of trial and error marketing strategies.

Costume Maker Diane described entrepreneurs in her Facebook networking group experiencing burnout, particularly because of the constant need to adapt to platform changes:

“Sometimes there’ll be a business that’s just got to the point of complete frustration. And sometimes they’ll get really frustrated and they’ll post...and we’ll be...like, yeah, we’re facing the same problem.”

Similarly, Hannah, the Writer I introduced earlier in this chapter, commented on the saturation of social media content and the unpredictability of algorithms, which were contributing to disillusionment among entrepreneurs:

“I do think people are just overwhelmed with content now...There’s this pressure to constantly bash out content. Instead of saying maybe we just don’t need all the content, maybe everybody just needs to not post daily, and that’s okay.”

These pressures are compounded by the normalisation of side-hustle culture in popular entrepreneurship discourse. This is the idea that businesses can and should be developed alongside salaried employment, as passion projects or secondary income streams (Sessions et al. 2021). The combination of paid employment and self-employment enabled participants like Summer and Vanessa to pursue self-employment as passion projects that may eventually generate revenue. This gives them the flexibility to test ideas without immediate risk and lessens the pressures of algorithmic sense-making that I have identified throughout this thesis. However, the normalisation of side-hustle culture reinforces the idea that entrepreneurial success can be pursued alongside paid employment. It promotes a labour model in which individuals are expected to work doubly, sustaining waged work while simultaneously building and monetising businesses on social media. Rather than creating viable alternatives to traditional employment, platform entrepreneurship increasingly demands that workers take on both roles in order to manage risk and remain visible. As such, it is dependent upon and reproduces the figure of the neoliberal ideal worker, described by Gill (2010) as self-sacrificing, self-directed, and entrepreneurial, yet deeply vulnerable to risk, insecurity, and exhaustion.

Although the side-hustle model may offer temporary flexibility, the examples discussed in this chapter suggest that once digital entrepreneurship becomes a full-time livelihood, it becomes markedly more precarious. Participants who relied solely on their businesses for income often found it harder to invest in visibility strategies, absorb the costs of experimentation, or sustain engagement during periods of low organic reach. As earlier sections have shown, financial risk, emotional strain, and the demands of constant adaptation intensify when entrepreneurship is no longer supplemented by waged income. In this context, the promise of digital entrepreneurship as flexible and empowering (Duffy and Hund 2015) is undermined by the platform's structural conditions, particularly the uneven burdens of algorithmic sense-making.

7.4 Differences in When and How Participants Choose to Engage in Algorithmic Sense-Making

Some participants, including Nadia, the Private Tutor, and Suzanne, the Dog Groomer, demonstrated limited awareness of how algorithms affect their platform visibility and exemplified a different relationship with platform logics; one in which social media is used as a 'shop front' rather than a strategic means of generating revenue. These women entrepreneurs described how they used social media in a relatively passive way, which involved maintaining a minimal presence without actively engaging with algorithmic logics and visibility strategies. This contrasts with extant literature and wider discourses about digital entrepreneurship which assume that most entrepreneurs who have a social media presence are actively attempting to make sense of algorithms and engage in 'the visibility game' (Cotter 2019).

Unlike participants who were actively engaged in algorithmic sense-making, Nadia and Suzanne treated social media as a static business presence, more comparable to a bricks-and-mortar shop front than a dynamic space that demanded ongoing adaptation and optimisation.

Nadia is the Private Tutor I introduced in Chapter Five. She tutors children of primary and secondary school ages in a range of subjects. She is a 35 years old

British Asian woman, and has a Masters Degree in Education. She did not disclose whether she has any disability or long term health conditions. She has a one year old child and, at the time of our interview, had recently returned to work following maternity leave. Her primary source of income is self-employment and she did not disclose her total annual household income.

Nadia described her Facebook Page as a digital shop front; that simply indicated to potential customers that her business was active and legitimate. Nadia's social media practices suggest that she has internalised certain expectations about how businesses should present themselves online. She assumes that a business without a social media presence may appear less legitimate or trustworthy, explaining that: "I don't really do much on Facebook, but I know people expect businesses to have a page, so I keep it up. It's just there, really." Nadia's restrained use of social media implies a level of self-regulation based on perceived expectations of business professionalism and the market norms of the platform economy.

Despite minimal engagement with sense-making, algorithmic vibes are still evident. Nadia's assumption that a business must have a social media presence suggests an underlying awareness of platform visibility as valuable, even if she does not deliberately pursue it. She has developed a sense of how digital visibility works through informal observations, cultural narratives about digital entrepreneurship, and the presence of other businesses online. While she does not track engagement metrics or optimize her posts, she still senses a relationship between presence and reach, maintaining her page based on vibes rather than strategy. This demonstrates that platform logics subtly influence how users position themselves in digital spaces, even when they are not consciously trying to make sense of them. By maintaining a Facebook Page without actively using it, Nadia embodies a passive form of platform participation, where social media presence is shaped by external expectations more than by deliberate algorithmic sense-making.

Nadia felt able to take minimal interest in algorithmic sense-making because her services were fully booked, with enquiries usually being generated by referrals from existing customers. Hence, Nadia's understanding of how social media platforms distribute content was limited and her primary assumption was that Facebook would display her content to local users for whom it may be relevant. She summarised:

“I just post things sometimes, but I don’t really think about how many people see it. I guess Facebook just shows it to people nearby. I assume that’s how it works.”

In a similar way, Suzanne, the Dog Groomer I introduced earlier, explained that she had not posted on her Facebook Page in over a year because she was sufficiently busy, yet she continued to receive enquiries on social media through word-of-mouth referrals and clients tagging her in local Facebook community groups. Suzanne recognised that being tagged in other users’ posts increased her visibility, although she explained this in terms of traditional word-of-mouth marketing, as opposed to engagement being a determining factor in algorithmic recommendations. In this way, Suzanne relied on her existing network to sustain her business and rarely posted on social media, saying that “I guess it keeps me visible without me having to do anything”. Nadia and Suzanne’s responses reinforce the idea that even where engagement in algorithmic sense-making and social media practices is minimal, everyday women entrepreneurs often recognise that platform visibility follows certain patterns and are able to orient themselves in some way, even if this is relatively passive.

Nadia and Suzanne’s passive engagement with algorithms should not be misinterpreted as a lack of digital literacy or marketing knowledge. Although these factors may have been contributing factors, there was no evidence in the interviews to support such assertions. Instead, I argue that “offline” success can afford everyday women entrepreneurs greater freedom to limit engagement with algorithmically-driven platforms. Importantly, this challenges epistemic hierarchies (Alcoff and Potter 1993) that might position data-driven or highly strategic forms of algorithmic sense-making as inherently superior. Nadia and Suzanne’s practices reveal that viable, sustainable entrepreneurship can emerge through alternative forms of knowledge and visibility, including long-standing community ties and locally embedded forms of credibility, which do not require active engagement with platform logics.

Although both Nadia and Suzanne were sole traders operating modest-sized businesses, they benefited from strong social networks, which reduced their reliance on social media for generating revenue. The ability to use social media in such a

passive manner is itself a form of privilege, as business models sustained through personal recommendations and community connections depend on having well-established networks of trust and support (Martinez Dy et al 2017). Unlike some of my participants who felt compelled to actively navigate platform visibility to attract clients, Nadia's reliance on her professional and personal networks allows her to treat social media as a static business presence rather than a critical tool for growth. She depends entirely on word-of-mouth and local community networks, maintaining a minimal social media presence without it impacting her revenue. She does not feel the need to engage deeply with social media because her offline reputation sustains a steady flow of clients. Similarly, Suzanne benefits from having existing clients and supportive friends and family who are active on social media and willing to share her occasional posts and tag her in Facebook Groups when people express a need for her services. This informal network acts as a substitute for algorithmic sense-making, as her visibility is maintained through social connections rather than platform expertise. Women with strong social networks may not feel the same urgency to make sense of algorithms, in contrast to entrepreneurs who depend more on digital visibility for client acquisition.

However, business priorities and attitudes towards social media are also subject to change. Whilst Suzanne had mostly used social media passively she was considering creating content for TikTok and Instagram Reels. This decision stemmed from her personal use of these platforms, where she noticed many American dog groomers sharing short-form videos but few English groomers doing the same, leading her to see a potential opportunity for visibility. While she currently relies on word-of-mouth referrals and client tagging in Facebook groups, her consideration of TikTok reflects an awareness that platform engagement may become necessary to sustain or grow her business. This suggests that even entrepreneurs who have traditionally depended on offline networks or a passive social media presence may eventually feel compelled to engage more actively with platform logics.

Relatedly, entrepreneurs who have benefitted from business growth and stability in the past due to having strong online followings and support networks, can find their approach to algorithmic sense-making and visibility practices affected by shifting

platform logics. Similar to Nadia and Suzanne, Erica has a well-established business consultancy service and relies heavily on word-of-mouth referrals and existing networks. Prior to starting her business, Erica was a Family Lawyer; she did not provide any other information about her background or demographics. She felt that her existing network and established customer base allow her to invest minimal time and effort into algorithmic sense-making.

However, unlike Nadia and Suzanne, Erica's business was originally built on social media. She was once deeply invested in content creation and audience engagement, but over time, platform changes and declining organic reach made social media feel like an increasingly unrewarding space for sustaining a business. Reflecting on how dramatically the platform landscape has changed, particularly in terms of how difficult it is to gain organic reach on social media, Erica explained:

"I wouldn't be able to do what I've done, starting now. Because I think it just isn't a place to be able to do that...I think you can't connect and engage with people...I could have 100 people on live on a Wednesday night. I just wouldn't reach 100 people now...it kind of dropped off a cliff. It...just disappeared."

Erica's decision to minimise her engagement with social media was in response to the growing inefficacy of organic reach. She once regularly hosted live Facebook broadcasts with over a hundred engaged viewers, but now finds that even reaching a hundred people organically is difficult. She describes her frustration:

"Once upon a time I would get a hundred people on a live video and now you wouldn't even get a hundred reach on it. So it's just not worth my while investing the time, effort, energy, and attention into the same social media strategy I had five years ago."

Unlike Nadia and Suzanne, who have never relied on social media for visibility, Erica experienced firsthand how platform changes disrupted business models that depended on 'organic' visibility (i.e. not paid advertising). Her reflections highlight a fundamental shift in platform capitalism, where visibility is increasingly tied to paid advertising and she critiques this shift, explaining:

“Creating community isn't the sort of thing you can do through paid-for advertising. You can't pay to bring a community around you who want to interact and engage because you can pay to click here. You can pay, you can pay for a like, you can pay for this, but you can't pay for connection...Connection has disappeared.”

Her experience illustrates that even established businesses with strong networks are vulnerable to the changing logics of platform visibility. While Erica, like Nadia and Suzanne, can afford to disengage, this is not because she never needed social media but because she has already built the social capital necessary to sustain her business without it. However, for newer entrepreneurs without such networks, this lack of organic reach creates a major barrier to success, making algorithmic sense-making an unavoidable requirement rather than an optional strategy.

The differences in how entrepreneurs experience shifting platform logics and attempt to make sense of algorithms cannot be explained purely by how long they have been in business or their level of social capital. While some, like Erica, have successfully maintained a strong client base despite declining organic reach, others find themselves continuously engaging in algorithmic sense-making and adapting their practices in response to platform instability.

One key distinction is Erica's level of success and industry reputation. She not only built a large following on social media but became well-known and respected in her field, which is business development. This gave her a stable base of repeat clients and referrals, reducing her reliance on constantly attracting new customers. While business coaching often fosters long-term client relationships, the same could be said for entrepreneurs in comparable sectors, such as graphic design and business development. However, participants in these sectors reported that algorithmic changes made it harder to reach their existing audiences, as well as attract new followers, forcing them into cycles of visibility loss and adaptation.

The critical factor, then, is not simply business type or length of time in business but how different entrepreneurs were able to leverage platform affordances at key moments in their trajectory. Erica, like many in this study, built her business entirely on social media, relying on platform visibility to grow her audience and client base.

She was able to capitalise on a period of higher organic reach, allowing her to establish a strong professional reputation and client relationships before platform visibility became more volatile.

In contrast, other entrepreneurs in similar fields also started and grew their businesses on social media but experienced greater precarity in maintaining visibility. Many reported that platform instability made it difficult to sustain audience engagement and client acquisition, even after years of business experience. Unlike Erica, whose brand recognition and repeat clients buffered her from declining reach, these entrepreneurs remained heavily dependent on algorithmic visibility to attract new clients, making them more vulnerable to what Duffy (2020) terms algorithmic precarity. This suggests that early platform conditions influenced whose visibility remained resilient over time. While Erica's business was deeply embedded in social media, she had already built a strong network and reputation under more favorable algorithmic conditions. As platforms became increasingly "pay-to-play", entrepreneurs who had not yet reached the same level of professional visibility found it harder to sustain audience engagement and grow their businesses without continuing to invest labour into algorithmic sense-making and visibility practices.

The challenges faced by entrepreneurs in maintaining visibility were not only shaped by early platform conditions but also by how businesses evolved in response to shifting digital landscapes. Erica was able to sustain her client base without major strategic pivots, but others found that staying visible required substantial changes to their business models. A number of participants had changed the nature of their business over the years, adapting to shifts in the market and platform dynamics. These changes were often driven by a combination of strategic decisions and necessity, sometimes reflecting where they saw new opportunities but also a response to stunted business growth due to declining visibility on social media. This was the case for Phoebe, the Astrologer I introduced earlier, who experienced dramatic fluctuations in visibility despite having built a dedicated audience. Phoebe told me the following:

"People who were dedicated followers of mine on Instagram...all of a sudden saw nothing from me and would DM me and say, 'Do you know, I haven't seen any of your posts for ages. You've just cropped up in my feed

now.’ You know? And for weeks they’ve gone from seeing me daily, seeing my stories, seeing my feed, to absolutely nothing and they were always following me. So if the algorithm gives them what they like and they were liking me, then...something...changed to stop them seeing that...So that was quite frustrating that you’ve built up a following that all of a sudden Instagram then don’t show them.”

Unlike Erica, who was able to step back from social media once her brand was well established, Phoebe’s business remained highly dependent on social media visibility. Her response to declining reach was to pivot between platforms, constantly trying to re-establish her audience. Initially, she responded to Instagram’s decline by shifting her focus to Facebook, but over time she found that visibility declined there too, prompting her to return to Instagram or experiment with non-algorithmically-driven platforms like WhatsApp. This cycle of oscillating between platforms exemplifies the ongoing labour required of entrepreneurs whose revenue depends on social media. For these entrepreneurs, success is contingent on how well they align their content with ever-shifting algorithmic priorities, as visibility is never stable, nor is it based purely on expertise, experience, or audience loyalty.

While someone like Erica can rely on repeat business and long-term industry reputation, Phoebe’s experience reflects a far more precarious relationship with platform visibility, which demands constant adaptation to avoid being pushed into obscurity by unpredictable algorithmic shifts. Entrepreneurs like Phoebe are not just competing in their industries, they are also competing against the platforms themselves, continuously working to adapt to evolving digital landscapes.

7.5 Time, Care, and the Everyday Constraints of Algorithmic Sense-Making

7.5.1 Managing Time Between Platform Demands and Business Realities

Algorithmic sense-making was also constrained by time, caregiving responsibilities, and the practical demands of running a business. These constraints limited

participants' capacity not only to create content, post regularly on social media platforms and maintain consistency on platforms, but also to monitor metrics, experiment with visibility strategies, or adapt to algorithmic fluctuations. This section explores how time scarcity, the need for sustained effort in planning, content creation and evaluation, and the affective demands of platform labour are entangled with algorithmic sense-making and with the uneven experiences of visibility that women entrepreneurs navigate.

A recurring challenge for participants was the difficulty of maintaining consistency on social media when their business became busy. As discussed in Chapter Five, algorithmic visibility often demands regular posting, responsiveness to trends, engagement with metrics, and ongoing experimentation. As Arriagada and Ibáñez (2020) observe, "the instantaneity [of social media] means more work for creators: they must constantly create content, spend time looking at reactions to their publications, and measure audience impact" (p. 7). For women entrepreneurs with limited time, this requirement to remain continuously attentive to platform dynamics adds a layer of affective and temporal pressure to already precarious labour.

Sustaining these practices alongside the everyday demands of running a business often proved difficult. Even when participants recognised the potential value of engaging proactively in algorithmic sense-making, limited time made this work difficult to prioritise. Melissa, who has an embroidery business, for example, acknowledged that although she valued learning from others in her industry, she was too busy to engage in sustained research on algorithms and visibility. Her engagement was limited to watching the occasional YouTube video when time allowed. This suggests that algorithmic sense-making requires not only interest or motivation, but also time; a resource that was in short supply for many of my participants. The time required to engage in sense-making often competed with more immediate business demands, such as fulfilling orders, client communication, and service delivery.

Melissa also saw rapid visibility growth as a potential risk to small businesses, expressing apprehension about the sustainability of sudden success. She saw viral growth as a potential risk for small businesses, expressing apprehension about the

sustainability of sudden surges in attention. While a viral video could increase visibility, it might also bring a rapid influx of demand that was difficult to manage. Reflecting on this, she noted:

“As much as everyone goes, oh, it's really nice to get a viral video...you're just sitting there going...all of a sudden I've got 100,000 orders that I need to get out within X amount of time...it's one of those double-edged swords.”

For Melissa, viral success posed a challenge as well as an opportunity; a sudden influx of orders could quickly exceed her capacity, potentially impacting her business' long-term stability. Unlike larger businesses or entrepreneurs with greater financial and operational resources, she lacked the ability to rapidly scale up production, making it difficult to respond to unexpected growth. As she said:

“I haven't slept for like two weeks because, you know, especially being a small business, it's either just that person or it's that person and maybe a couple of family members. But...you can only turn out so much.”

Without the capacity to invest in new equipment or hire additional staff, Melissa risked burnout, production delays, and potential reputational damage, which illustrates the precarious balance between algorithmic visibility and business sustainability. These pressures were further exacerbated by platform-imposed fulfilment requirements, particularly on TikTok. As Melissa explained, the platform imposes rigid expectations for delivery times:

"They [TikTok] turn around and they say, right, you've got this product, it needs to be shipped in the same day or the following day. And I'm like, well, that's not going to happen because I don't have that level of storage [for stock]...I can't, you know. One of the bikes I'm doing [embroidering] at the moment is 75 minutes...So I can't say that I can get something out within 24 hours. And then if you can't get it out in 24 hours and you get penalised, then you get put down the list again."

Melissa felt that TikTok's fulfilment demands did not account for the realities of small-scale, craft-based production. If entrepreneurs like Melissa could not meet these standards, they risked being penalised by the platform's ranking systems, diminishing their visibility just as demand increased. In this way, the very mechanisms that elevate a product can simultaneously render it unsustainable, entrenching algorithmic precarity.

7.5.2 Balancing Care and the Demands of Algorithmic Sense-Making

Caregiving responsibilities, especially parenting, continue to fall disproportionately on women (Office of National Statistics 2023). These responsibilities also affected how much participants were able to engage in algorithmic sense-making and experimentation with visibility practices. As with Diane, caregiving responsibilities not only limited the time available for formal training but also affected some participants' ability to engage with social media platforms on a regular basis. With limited time, participants had to prioritise certain tasks, which often meant spending less time on activities like analysing metrics or producing content that was particularly time-consuming, such as videos.

For example, Dance Teacher Elizabeth's approach to social media marketing changed dramatically after she became a parent. As her time became more constrained, she shifted towards what she described as more efficient content strategies, choosing formats that demanded less planning, production time, or engagement. Elizabeth explained:

"Before I had [child's name]...it'd be right I'm going to do this many posts a week and...I'm going to spend so many hours planning...I'm...more flexible with it now because I have to be more flexible."

This adaptation reflects how caregiving not only limited her availability, but also altered how she approached algorithmic sense-making in practice. As discussed in Chapter Six, Elizabeth also responded to time constraints by limiting her engagement with social media metrics and instead relying on algorithmic vibes to guide her visibility strategies. Her experience illustrates how time scarcity and care

responsibilities become entangled with the affective and practical labour of platform participation. It is important to note, however, that Elizabeth's ability to rely on "vibes" - a term which she uses herself - was enabled by her business's maturity. She had been self-employed for many years, had invested in training, and had built a stable client base. This foundation gave her a degree of security, allowing her to adopt a more intuitive approach to social media marketing. She described this shift as being able to "kind of relax into it and you just get a vibe and a sense of what's going on."

Lily, the Outsourcing Specialist I introduced earlier, offered a different perspective on how participants navigated the temporal demands of platform labour. Rather than stepping back entirely, she actively imposed boundaries to manage the competing demands of family life, business, and the affective pull of social media. She described setting a clear boundary for herself, promising her children that she would disengage from work-related phone use in the evenings:

"What I've said to the kids now is that I will leave my phone in my office after 6 pm at night... don't contact me after six o'clock, you won't get an answer till tomorrow kind of thing."

This reflects a conscious effort to structure her day around both care obligations and the lure of platform engagement. As Ekinsmyth (2014) argues in her study of 'mumpreneurship', self-employment is often organised around the demands of childcare. Whilst this is frequently framed as an empowering and liberating framework, in practice entrepreneurial work often becomes closely tied to domestic routines, such as school drop-offs, naps, and meal times. In this context, flexibility does not necessarily translate into freedom, but instead reinforces women's responsibility for managing the competing demands of work and family.

Lily went on to add:

"When you've got that lure of a dopamine hit from being on social media or getting some engagement... you're going to prioritize that, right?"

Her reflections highlight how the demands of algorithmic sense-making are entangled with the affective atmospheres of platforms. For entrepreneurs with caregiving responsibilities, such as Lily, this creates a particular kind of tension: the constant availability demanded by caregiving intersects with the affective pull of social media, making it difficult to disengage from platforms that reward continuous presence. As Alter (2017) notes, platform interfaces are designed to incentivise responsiveness and sustain user attention. This represents a form of affective labour that involves continually negotiating attentiveness across competing domains.

The idea that self-employment offers greater flexibility is often invoked as a solution to the competing demands of work and care (Matysiak and Mynarska 2020). However, participants' accounts suggest that this flexibility is heavily constrained by caregiving responsibilities, particularly parenting. These constraints not only shaped how time was distributed across work and care but also limited the capacity to engage in algorithmic sense-making. This aligns with Hagqvist et al.'s (2018) finding that self-employed women experience higher levels of work–life interference than their male counterparts, with caregiving responsibilities acting as a significant constraint on their time and capacity. In this sense, the ideal of flexibility can obscure the gendered dynamics that persist within digital self-employment. Flexibility is often absorbed into domestic responsibilities, limiting opportunities to build visibility or sustain strategic engagement with algorithmic sense-making.

Crucially, these constraints were not experienced evenly. Participants' capacity to construct and act on algorithmic vibes was deeply entangled with material conditions, including the temporal demands of caregiving. In this way, algorithmic sense-making is a matter of situated privilege. Those with fewer caregiving responsibilities were often better positioned to maintain a visible presence on platforms, test different strategies, and respond to shifting platform atmospheres. By contrast, participants managing caregiving responsibilities and constrained by less flexible routines frequently described feeling overwhelmed or less able to engage in algorithmic sense-making. These inequalities underscore that algorithmic visibility is not universally attainable, but mediated by temporal conditions that are deeply gendered and that differentially structure participation in the platform economy.

7.6 Uneven Experiences of “fitting in” on Social Media

Everyday women entrepreneurs encounter shifting platform norms that demand continuous adaptation. These norms are often intuited through platform feedback, peer observation, and affective engagement; what I have conceptualised as algorithmic vibes. Yet the ways they respond to these demands are uneven, as their responses intersect with a range of factors, including social, cultural, and economic position. At the same time, not all differences in response to platform norms can be explained by structural differences and inequalities. Divergences can also reflect personal values, preferences, or affective responses that lie beyond the scope of what can be systematically accounted for. Consistent with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, I understand such orientations as constructed in the context of ongoing social and historical conditions, without assuming they are always reducible to identifiable structural constraints. What feels intuitive, legitimate, or visible to one entrepreneur may feel inaccessible, uncomfortable, or risky to another. By attending to the lived experiences of platform norms, this section contributes to understanding algorithmic vibes as situated. In the following, I discuss how participants make sense of the tacit expectations of platform culture, including ideas about what kinds of content and presentations “fit” with platforms’ logics of visibility.

One of the dominant content norms across social media platforms is the use of video, particularly where the creator is visually present and personally featured (Bishop 2023). This expectation is reinforced by platform algorithms that are thought to prioritise video content in feeds and discovery mechanisms (Sprout Social 2023). However, for many participants, this norm presents significant challenges. Creating video content, and appearing in it, often requires not only technical resources and time, but also a degree of personal exposure that may feel uncomfortable or at odds with their values or sense of professionalism. As Rachel, the Property Portfolio Builder I introduced earlier, explained,

Like social media for a lot of people, like a lot of the women in my group...it's their biggest fear. They're absolutely terrified of posting. They don't know what to say and they feel awkward...it's took them like an hour

to [create] all this content and like how are you going to look and feel, like getting imposter syndrome, feeling like a fraud.

Rachel's account points to how video visibility can evoke feelings of vulnerability, fear of judgement, and internalised pressure to perform competence. For those who do not feel confident or comfortable being visibly present in this way, algorithmic sense-making becomes entangled with self-doubt, perfectionism, and feelings of illegitimacy, all of which complicate the possibility of adapting to dominant platform norms.

As Natalie, the Business Development Coach I introduced in Chapter Six, explained, although most people now have smartphones with built-in recording tools, this does not make video production "accessible" for all entrepreneurs. Natalie is a 42 year old woman who identifies her ethnicity as English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British. She lives with her parents and does not have any children. She has a BA(hons) Degree. Self-employment is her primary source of income, although she combines this with paid employment; her total annual household income is in the £30,000 to £39,000 bracket. She has a disability / long-term health condition which affects her ability to carry out day-to-day activities a little.

Natalie suggested that technical access to the equipment and tools needed to produce videos does not equate to emotional or practical ease, particularly when visibility norms demand confident, polished self-presentation. She explained:

"For me, it's not as simple as just pointing the camera. Because I feel so uncomfortable with it, then it can be like a three-day fight just to record something."

For Natalie, who described struggling with confidence and feelings of over-exposure on social media, the labour of appearing confident and camera-ready, particularly in a saturated and comparison-driven online space, became a source of strain, consuming time and energy that could otherwise be directed toward business development.

Similarly, Lily, the Outsourcing Specialist, described feeling trapped in a cycle of disappointment and frustration, caught between the pressure to produce content that aligns with platform norms and her own preference for content formats she found more manageable. Whilst discussing the challenges of creating video content, Lily explained:

“I know you don't have to be an extrovert to be on camera but because I don't enjoy being on camera it actually takes me much longer and it actually makes me less productive. Because I don't enjoy being on camera it actually takes me much longer and it...makes me less productive. It means I'm putting less content out there.”

Lily's account reveals how affective responses, such as discomfort, fatigue, and diminished productivity, can intersect to make acts of resistance feel both necessary and difficult. Even when participants rejected dominant trends, they often remained entangled in platform norms, negotiating trade-offs between professional ease, sustainability, and algorithmic visibility.

Many participants felt that social media platforms, like Instagram and TikTok, were increasingly prioritising short-form video content in their algorithmic recommendations. Several observed that static posts, long-form content, and even traditional expertise-driven material were becoming less visible as platform algorithms increasingly prioritised fast-paced, entertaining formats such as viral trends, challenges, and meme-based content.

This shift was particularly frustrating for participants who had been using social media for a long time and had built their audiences through more informational or expertise-driven content but found their previous strategies becoming less effective over time. For example, Phoebe, the Astrologer I introduced earlier, reflected on how the visibility of her astrology content had declined, despite years of consistent audience engagement. She expressed frustration that the rules of visibility seemed to be changing and described feeling like she was “trapped in a toxic cycle” of trying to adapt while struggling to maintain her professional identity. Phoebe told me:

“It’s exhausting, to be honest. Every time I think I’ve worked out what I need to do, the algorithm changes, and I’m back at square one. I’ve built my whole business around offering insight and depth, but now it feels like the platforms just want bite-sized, viral content. It’s like the space for real expertise is shrinking.”

Like many other participants, Phoebe was detecting these shifts based on an intuitive sense of what types of content the platform was rewarding. As Ruckenstein (2023) argues, the ‘feel’ of algorithmic culture is not universal but is shaped by how individuals position themselves in relation to platform technologies. Many participants expressed feeling ‘out of place’ in a digital landscape that increasingly rewarded performative, fast-paced, and highly visual content. For instance, Hulwi, a Coach for Muslim women, expressed discomfort with the “pointing and dancing” trends common in short-form video content, which she perceived as undermining the professional tone she wanted to maintain for her business. Hulwi is a 44 year old British African woman. She has a Masters Degree, her primary source of income is self-employment, and her total annual household income is in the £9,999 or less bracket. She does not have any children, and does not have any disability or long-term health condition.

Speaking about short-form video content and current trends she observed on social media, Hulwi told me:

“I can’t do the pointing and dancing. I see it all the time, and I know it probably works, but it’s just not me. It doesn’t fit with how I want to present myself professionally.”

Hulwi’s statement exemplifies the affective orientation that is central to algorithmic vibes; she does not know with certainty that these trends “work,” but senses that they probably do. Her response also signals a tension between dominant platform norms and participants’ professional or personal identities, suggesting that algorithmic vibes are constructed in relation to complex negotiations of legitimacy, credibility, and the risks of self-presentation in a commercial context. As Natalie, the Business Development Coach I introduced earlier, summarised:

“I'm all for fun...and I will put giggle content in there. I'm more than happy to. I just find it very difficult when you've got professionals doing the point and dance and shake it all about.”

Participants' responses reflected affective orientations based, in particular, on feelings of discomfort or apprehension toward practices that conflicted with their values or preferred modes of self-presentation, but which seemed necessary for visibility. Some felt pressured to adopt strategies, such as frequent posting or using specific hashtags that they might otherwise avoid but believed would increase their reach. Similarly, many observed that short-form video content, such as TikTok videos and Instagram Reels using trending audio, appeared to be favoured by platform algorithms. Yet this visibility logic created unease, particularly around practices like dancing, which some participants associated with youthful, informal, or trivialised content.

Kimberley, the murder-mystery game business I introduced earlier, expressed this tension, noting that some of the topics she addresses, including elements of true crime, are sensitive in nature. She also reflected on how her age shaped her discomfort with certain platform trends:

“I'm balancing the fact that some of it [content] can be quite sensitive and the fact I'm in my forties, I'm not really going to be doing the....trendy dancing on TikTok.”

To address this, Kimberley undertook the additional labour of identifying an alternative content format for TikTok and Reels, that she felt was authentic to her brand and manageable within her schedule. This required a creative negotiation of platform expectations, balancing affective and professional orientations with the imperative to remain visible.

While short-form video was the most commonly cited format that participants felt pressured to adopt, certain styles of static content were also perceived to be favoured by platform algorithms, particularly selfies and personal storytelling. These were understood to generate higher levels of engagement and reach, especially on

platforms like Instagram. Although selfies have long been a popular feature of social media (Tiidenberg 2018), their prominence has increased with the rise of platform features such as Instagram Stories, which have contributed to the normalisation of personal, image-based content and intensified its role in algorithmic visibility (Arriagada and Ibáñez 2020). The rise of Story features across platforms has not only increased the visibility of personal, image-based content but also contributed to the normalisation of a self-focused aesthetic. For some participants in this study, such features shaped the perception that platforms reward visually curated self-presentation and reinforced the sense that maintaining visibility often required ongoing personal disclosure. For instance, Alice, the Happiness Consultant I discussed in Chapter Five and Six, observed that her more personal posts, particularly if accompanied by a selfie, consistently outperformed those that focused on informational content:

“I definitely find that more personal content works better...a selfie and a bit of a personal story...nine times out of ten will outperform...the heavier content.”

Alice is a 40 year old White woman who identifies as English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British. She has a postgraduate qualification (Bar Vocational Course), her primary source of income is self-employment, as she reports that her total annual household income is in the £100,000 or more bracket. She has a five year old child. She has a disability / long-term health condition which affects her ability to carry out day-to-day activities a little. Her work involves delivering talks, workshops, away days and lunch and learn sessions in workplaces to support employers in improving the happiness and wellbeing of their workforce.

Whilst Alice was relatively comfortable with posting selfies and saw it as an effective way to increase her platform visibility, other participants expressed discomfort with this visibility logic. Posting selfies was not perceived merely as a stylistic or aesthetic preference, but as part of a broader platform logic that privileged curated intimacy, visibility of the self, and performative authenticity (Duffy and Hund 2019; Arriagada and Bishop 2021). These forms of self-presentation were often seen as

necessary for reach and engagement, even when they sat uneasily with participants' professional identities or content strategies.

For example, Claire, the Business Coach I mentioned in Chapter Five and Six, told me:

"I think Instagram...creates pressure to be a certain way or...to...have the perfect picture or the perfect selfie or whatever. I don't like that. I'm all about being authentic...I talk to a lot of women who will say...I can't post this selfie because my hair's not perfect or...I can't compete with this, that and the other...I find it to be very much a pressure cooker and very much a superficial one as well...If you're into that that's fine but I'm not, so I do it because I need to do it for the business but it's not natural for me."

At the time of our interview Claire had been in business for approximately six years. Alongside her core business, through which she provides business coaching to women entrepreneurs, she also provides consultancy services to a University and occasionally supports businesses with grant writing. She is a 42 year old woman who identifies her ethnicity as English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British. She has a Masters Degree and her primary source of income is self-employment. She did not provide her total annual household income. She has a 9 year old child, and she does not identify as disabled.

Claire's reflections on the pressures to "have the perfect picture or the perfect selfie" capture how platform logics can create affective pressures that conflict with participants' established professional identities, resulting in a sense of obligation rather than authentic engagement. Her feelings of discomfort and artificiality, posting selfies not because it feels natural, but because it is perceived as algorithmically necessary, reflect a deeper tension. Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus helps explain this tension, describing how individuals internalise particular dispositions, preferences, and ways of acting based on their social, cultural, and professional experiences. Habitus guides practice in ways that usually feel natural, intuitive, and comfortable because they are familiar and historically embedded. Participants who had established their businesses around expertise-driven or informational content

developed habituated practices that aligned with their professional identities and previous experiences of visibility. However, as platform norms shifted towards more performative, visual, and rapidly-consumed content forms, these participants sensed that their previously effective practices had become misaligned with algorithmic logics. This misalignment between participants' habituated practices, grounded in professional legitimacy and informational content, and new, platform-driven visibility norms created tension and a sense of displacement, as some participants struggled to adapt to the unfamiliar digital labour required to remain algorithmically visible.

Moreover, these evolving platform expectations reinforce broader gendered and neoliberal norms associated with platform capitalism. Duffy and Hund (2019) describe the “authenticity bind,” where women entrepreneurs must navigate the dual pressure of appearing both entrepreneurial and emotionally relatable, positioning success as contingent upon ongoing affective self-performance. Platform and audience preferences for visually engaging, emotionally resonant, and intimately personal content further reinforce the ‘makeover paradigm’ (Marlow 2020), which suggests that women entrepreneurs must continuously adapt their digital presence to fit dominant platform logics. Consequently, the imperative of “fitting in” extends beyond visibility practices, becoming a form of gendered labour entangled with platformed expectations of femininity, authenticity, and self-optimisation.

Some participants, however, demonstrated more outright resistance to algorithmic logics and platform norms. Several engaged in experimentation and adaptation, but also resisted dominant platform conventions that conflicted with their professional values or sense of authenticity. This involved moments where participants chose to prioritise integrity or manageability over algorithmic optimisation, even at the cost of lower visibility.

As discussed earlier, participants like Kimberley sought to balance platform expectations with their own values, adapting formats in ways that felt comfortable and aligned with their values and professional identity. This example hinted at how resistance often took the form of negotiated or selective engagement, rather than outright rejection. Building on this, other participants described more deliberate shifts in strategy, moving away from dominant platforms or deprioritising algorithmic

self-making. For example, in Chapter Four and Five, I discussed Astrologer Phoebe's growing frustration with the demands of optimising her practices in response to the visibility logics of social media platforms, whilst rewards were unpredictable and often disappointing. Rather than continuing to conform to platform norms, she reoriented her practices to incorporate private-messaging, such as WhatsApp, where she could connect directly with her audience without having to optimise content for algorithmic visibility. She described WhatsApp as more intimate and engaging, offering a greater sense of control than algorithmically-governed platforms like Instagram or TikTok:

"WhatsApp feels different. It's not about chasing the algorithm - it's about direct connection. I can actually have conversations with my clients without worrying if my post is going to get seen or not."

In contrast to social media platforms, where visibility depends on algorithmic sense-making, using WhatsApp was a way for Phoebe to resist these demands and orientate towards sustained interaction. Her decision reflects how some entrepreneurs resist platform logics by seeking alternative infrastructures that bypass algorithmic gatekeeping of visibility.

However, resistance to platform norms was not always straightforward nor easy to sustain. It was often accompanied by frustration, fatigue, and a continual sense of compromise. As discussed in Chapter Five, Phoebe's practices exemplify this complexity. Although she experimented with alternative platforms like WhatsApp, her journey was marked by frequent oscillation between platforms and ongoing adjustments to her practices, often in response to the affective strain of algorithmic precarity.

For some women, the pressure to conform to platform norms was further complicated by cultural differences, such as religious beliefs, racial identity and cultural practices. Hulwi, the Coach I introduced earlier who works specifically with Muslim women, discussed how the demands and challenges of marketing oneself as an entrepreneur on social media are experienced differently by different women:

“I think groups of people will have their own challenges within their groups...The extent to which individuals have the confidence, the imposter syndrome and so on, that will affect different people differently.”

Although none of the participants in this study explicitly cited their own religious beliefs as a barrier to self-presentation, Hulwi anecdotally shared that many women entrepreneurs she knew faced these challenges. She explained that for certain women in her community, religious beliefs prohibited them from showing their faces on social media. This created additional difficulties in navigating algorithmic visibility, as women with certain religious beliefs cannot create the type of highly personal, visually engaging content that tends to perform well. As Hulwi explained:

“There are women I know who don’t show their face at all, and that makes it so much harder for them. If the algorithm favours personal content, and personal means putting yourself out there in a certain way, then where does that leave them?”

Hulwi elaborated that some of these women found creative ways to present themselves on social media that were consistent with their religious beliefs:

“They end up doing things like where they do a video or their like from behind or on the side, so they’re not very visible but you still feel like there’s a person there. Others do still choose to show up with their face veil on.”

This highlights how algorithmic sense-making can demand additional labour from those whose religious or cultural practices constrain their participation in dominant platform norms. For women who cannot post selfies or appear on camera in conventional ways, the work of crafting visibility involves finding alternative strategies, such as posting from behind, using voiceovers, or framing images to imply presence without direct facial exposure. These approaches are creative, but they require extra effort and experimentation, often without assurance that they will generate the same engagement as more conventional forms of self-presentation. In this way, platform structures reward certain embodied performances while rendering

others less recognisable within dominant visibility logics. As Obreja (2025) argues, such expectations are not experienced uniformly. Drawing on an intersectional analysis of TikTok's affordances, she demonstrates how dominant expressions of femininity, often white, secular, and middle-class, are embedded into platform design and recognition systems, making it more difficult for women whose expressions of identity diverge from these norms to feel visible or successful. This reinforces the argument that algorithmic vibes, and the labour they entail, are not only affective and embodied, but also differentially distributed and culturally situated.

This dynamic also echoes the findings of Martinez Dy et al. (2017), who conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 women digital entrepreneurs in the UK to explore how intersecting inequalities shape experiences of online entrepreneurship. Albeit their study did not focus on social media specifically, it revealed how women from ethnic minority backgrounds often felt pressure to conform to dominant gendered and racialised norms in digital spaces. Some participants described obscuring markers of class, gender and ethnicity to avoid discrimination or negative attention, highlighting how whiteness and middle-class aesthetics remained deeply embedded in entrepreneurial legitimacy. Martinez Dy et al. argue that digital technologies do not erase social inequalities, but often reproduce and intensify them. Their conclusion, that women situated at "categorical intersections, such as Black and women of colour from poor and working-class backgrounds, are more likely to be the most structurally disadvantaged" (p. 396), is particularly relevant to algorithmic visibility. In the context of social media, this suggests that platform biases may further marginalise users whose self-presentation, content, or cultural positioning do not align with dominant aesthetic and behavioural norms, thus compounding the affective and strategic labour of algorithmic sense-making.

These intersecting dynamics of cultural marginalisation and visibility on social media were also evident in participants' experiences of community-building and audience reach. As discussed in Chapter Six, peer support networks sometimes played an important role in participants' algorithmic sense-making. However, developing such networks was more challenging for some participants than others. For example, Vanessa, the Black British - African Fashion Retailer and Interior Designer who I introduced earlier in this chapter, described the importance of building a network of

Black business owners because she wanted to see, support and be supported by “people that look like me” on social media. She explained that this could be challenging because “non-white business owners I don’t think get pushed as often as white business owners”. Vanessa’s reflections illustrate a form of algorithmic sense-making, grounded in experience and intuition, through which she perceived that Instagram and TikTok deprioritised content from Black-owned businesses. She described this experience as “exhausting”, noting that “there are loads of us, but we just are not seen.” Her account highlights how the affective labour of striving for visibility is compounded by racialised patterns of (in)visibility that shape how platform audiences are encountered and sustained.

Vanessa’s experience reflects what Bishop (2023) describes as “Instagram’s regimes of racialised visibility” (p. 6), in which lighter-skinned users are more likely to be algorithmically amplified due to the entrenchment of existing racial hierarchies within platform systems. This amplification does not occur in a vacuum, but through what Epps-Darling (2020, cited in Bishop 2023) terms “technological microaggressions” - subtle, cumulative forms of exclusion embedded in algorithmic processes. In this context, Vanessa’s perception that “non-white business owners...don’t get pushed” should be understood as a situated response to systemic inequalities in platform governance and algorithmic visibility. As Bishop (2023) argues, when the ability to be seen is differentially distributed by platform infrastructures, this results in unequal access to economic opportunities, audience reach, and professional recognition. Algorithmic vibes are also informed by broader social and racialised dynamics that pattern who is rendered visible, and who is not.

Vanessa had taken a proactive approach to what she described as “show[ing] the algorithm” the kinds of people and businesses she wanted to see in her feed. This involved deliberately following and engaging with Black-owned businesses and “platforms” that support them, reasoning that “if I didn’t do that, I wasn’t going to be seen, they were not going to be shown to me.” Within her network, Black entrepreneurs regularly engaged with one another’s posts to increase visibility, recognising that “we know that we need it so we can be seen.” Over time, these efforts also enhanced the usefulness of her feed, making it easier to discover relevant content, including funding opportunities and community events. Vanessa’s

account illustrates how peer support networks intersect with racialised platform dynamics, requiring additional labour not only to be seen, but to ensure that one's content reaches intended audiences. This was especially significant for Vanessa, whose products - hair wraps designed specifically for Black women - are unlikely to reach relevant consumers unless her feed is algorithmically attuned to those communities. Her account highlights how the work of algorithmic sense-making is intensified when visibility strategies must counteract both platform biases and broader patterns of exclusion, particularly when business and identity are closely intertwined.

7.7 Conclusion

Whilst beliefs about digital entrepreneurship are often underpinned by a meritocratic ethos that equates success with individual effort and competence (Gill 2014), this framing obscures the barriers that many women face in building and sustaining visibility online.

Participant accounts highlighted how gendered risks and affective pressures are entangled with their efforts to make sense of algorithms and pursue platform visibility. Many participants contended with aesthetic expectations, exposure to scrutiny from other social media users, and the threat of harassment, particularly when asserting expertise. These conditions render algorithmic sense-making an emotionally demanding process that involves negotiating safety, credibility, and wellbeing. Algorithmic vibes, in this context, offer a way of understanding how participants interpret and respond to these tensions, as affective, situated understandings of how visibility is earned, maintained, and felt. These practices of adaptation, refusal, or withdrawal reflect the gendered and contingent nature of digital labour in the platform economy, where emotional labour and social risk are deeply embedded in the pursuit of visibility (Duffy and Hund 2019).

Based on the findings presented in this chapter, I also argue that algorithmic sense-making is not evenly accessible: it demands time, financial resources, and peer support networks that are unevenly distributed across social and economic lines. Entrepreneurs with fewer of these resources sometimes struggle to make

sense of algorithms and maintain consistent visibility, which can limit their capacity to grow or sustain a viable business. However, this was not uniformly the case. For some participants, particularly those with strong local reputations or robust word-of-mouth networks, social media visibility was less central to their business success. These examples illustrate that while visibility is often a key concern, its significance varies across contexts and business models.

Access to formal training, marketing education, and paid advertising also differentiated participants' approaches to algorithmic sense-making. Those who could afford to invest in structured learning or expert-led courses were often more confident in experimenting with platform features and visibility strategies. Peer support networks, including facilitated mastermind groups, online co-working spaces, and coaching communities, also played a significant role in shaping participants' orientations to algorithmic visibility. However, these forms of support frequently required payment, and participants with limited financial resources were less able to access them. Similarly, participants who ran paid advertising campaigns described having greater control over reach and lead generation, reducing their reliance on organic reach. However, these opportunities were not equally distributed. For entrepreneurs operating under financial constraints, the inability to access high-quality training or invest in ads often resulted in greater uncertainty, slower growth, or more reliance on informal peer support. These differences underscore how algorithmic sense-making is shaped not only by what participants know, but by what forms of learning and promotional practice are available to them.

Health-related conditions also shaped participants' algorithmic sense-making, particularly in terms of energy, focus, and the ability to sustain ongoing engagement with platform practices. For participants managing chronic illness or mental health challenges, the demand to maintain consistent visibility, produce content and monitor metrics could be experienced as particularly draining. These accounts show that visibility is not only labour-intensive, but can also be physically and emotionally taxing, demanding capacities that are unevenly distributed. The pressure to be continuously visible, and to do so in ways that align with platform expectations, was often negotiated in relation to participants' health needs and wellbeing.

Caregiving responsibilities, especially parenting, also constrained how participants navigated algorithmic sense-making. While digital entrepreneurship is often celebrated for its flexibility (Ekinsmyth 2014), many participants described how caregiving reduced the time and mental space available for algorithmic sense-making and social media practices. These pressures shaped what was possible, limiting engagement with visibility strategies that required video production, real-time responsiveness, or close tracking of platform metrics. Caregiving intersected with participants' decisions to limit or restructure their social media practices, illustrating how time, care, and algorithmic visibility are tightly entangled.

The chapter has also drawn attention to cultural and religious differences, highlighting how participants' algorithmic sense-making was closely tied to decisions about self-presentation and content creation. For many participants, making sense of what the algorithm 'wants' involves interpreting which forms of visibility were most rewarded, and either adapting their practices to align with these expectations, negotiating a compromise, or resisting them altogether. These practices were not neutral, but entangled with values, norms, and beliefs that did not always align with dominant platform expectations. Some participants described how religious commitments to modesty limited their ability to share image-based content or post selfies; formats often perceived as algorithmically favoured. Others discussed how cultural positioning influences their understanding of which users and content are most likely to be amplified or rewarded by platform algorithms, particularly where platform aesthetics appear to privilege whiteness and normative femininities that prioritise polished professionalism, personal relatability, and strategic self-presentation (Duffy & Hund 2015; Obreja 2025). My findings align with Martinez Dy et al. (2017), who demonstrate how intersecting inequalities, particularly around race, gender, and class, shape which forms of entrepreneurial identity and labour are recognised and rewarded.

For some participants, the pursuit of visibility was bound up with expectations of emotional accessibility, professional credibility, and polished self-presentation; expectations that could be both externally imposed and internally felt. Platform structures, including algorithmic recommendations, affordances and governance mechanisms, play an active role in producing and intensifying these pressures by

privileging particular content forms, aesthetics, identities and styles of self-presentation (Noble 2018; Martinez Dy et al 2017). At times, these expectations create pressure to suppress discomfort or persist through harassment. In other cases, participants developed protective strategies such as stepping back from platforms, shifting to private spaces like WhatsApp, or taking social media ‘sabbaticals’. These accounts underline that algorithmic vibes are navigated through an ongoing process of boundary-setting, self-preservation, and refusal. These practices of refusal are not always framed as resistance by participants themselves, but they nevertheless challenge platform norms and expectations of entrepreneurial self-presentation by rejecting dominant visibility strategies. In these moments of resistance participants are making situated decisions about how much to engage, what to share, and which forms of visibility align with their goals and values. I argue that this is a key dimension of algorithmic vibes, which are situated orientations constructed through ongoing efforts to make sense of algorithmic logics. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, each participant’s position within society and the platform economy informs how they construct algorithmic vibes; that is, how they make sense of algorithmic logics, feel their way through uncertainty, navigate uneven expectations, and decide what practices are viable, desirable, or worth sustaining.

The findings presented in this chapter speak directly to the research questions guiding this thesis. Below, I briefly reflect on how this chapter contributes to each of them.

In response to the first research question, which asks how do everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms on a range of social media platforms, I argue that algorithmic sense-making is not a homogenised or static process, but a differentiated and situated practice shaped by uneven access to resources, knowledge, and support.

Some participants accessed paid training or structured business support, which often included access to peer communities where platform algorithms and visibility strategies were actively discussed. Others drew on freely available content shared by social media influencers and self-styled marketing experts, or engaged in ongoing

trial and error to inform their understanding. These approaches were not mutually exclusive. Many participants drew on multiple sources of information about algorithms, depending on what was accessible, affordable, and relevant to their goals and business context.

Algorithmic sense-making was also shaped by time constraints, particularly for those balancing caregiving, which limited the time participants' had available to analyse metrics, research algorithms, or follow trends and instead led them to rely on algorithmic vibes. Entrepreneurial experience, support networks, and access to paid advertising further influenced how much time and / or effort participants invested in algorithmic sense-making. For some, long-standing reputations or strong word-of-mouth referrals reduced the need to actively engage in algorithmic sense-making. Others, who could afford to pay for ads, engaged less with algorithmic sense-making. Taken together, I argue that these findings demonstrate how algorithmic sense-making is not a uniform process but constructed through entangled dynamics of time, confidence, access to support, and positioning within the platform economy.

In response to the second research question, which asks what is the nature of the relationship between everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and their social media practices, this chapter has shown that sense-making is deeply entangled with practical, emotional, and structural constraints. In making decisions about their platform practices, participants actively weighed the constraints of time, care, and day-to-day business demands, often prioritising what felt manageable, sustainable, or worthwhile.

Some participants adopted pragmatic practices, aiming to generate enough visibility to attract clients while avoiding unsustainable growth that might exceed their production capacity. Others used paid advertising to reduce reliance on algorithmic visibility, prioritising building audiences on platforms they perceived as more stable or controllable, such as their own websites or email lists. However, not all participants viewed paid visibility as reliable. Some who had previously invested in advertising described disappointing returns and instead focused on improving organic reach through algorithmic sense-making.

Algorithmic sense-making was entangled with participants' orientations toward visibility, legitimacy, and authenticity, informing and being informed by the practices they developed and enacted in response to platform conditions. Through algorithmic sense-making, many participants identified practices they believed would improve visibility, such as participating in TikTok trends, using selfies, or sharing personal content. However, some chose not to engage in these practices, or to limit their engagement, due to discomfort, perceived misalignment with their brand, or concerns about professionalism. Their decisions were often guided by what felt acceptable, sustainable, and aligned with their values, an orientation I conceptualise as algorithmic vibes, reinforcing that algorithmic sense-making is both affective and situated.

In response to the third research question, which asks what differences, if any, exist amongst different everyday women-entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and social media practices, I argue that differences are complex and not reducible to demographic categories alone. Intersecting inequalities, including gender, socio-economic position, race, religion, health, disability and caregiving and domestic responsibilities, are part of the lived conditions through which participants make sense of algorithms and develop orientations to platform logics. However, differences do not always map predictably onto conventional demographic categories. Characteristics such as entrepreneurial history, professional experience, formal training, and the perceived fit between participants' values and platform norms intersected with demographic categories to produce distinctive, and sometimes unexpected, orientations to platform algorithms. Some participants with similar economic resources or professional experience, for example, make sense of algorithms in markedly different ways and engage in differing social media practices.

I argue that algorithmic vibes, as constructed and situated orientations, account for this complexity by tracing how individuals make sense of algorithms differently, even when their demographic characteristics appear similar. Algorithmic vibes are produced through the lived conditions of entrepreneurship, including participants' histories, values, and perceptions of platform norms. In this way, difference is actively constructed through participants' algorithmic sense-making. For some

participants, algorithmic vibes register as friction, exclusion, or constraint; for others, they generate a sense of opportunity. These findings affirm the value of algorithmic vibes as a conceptual tool for understanding how difference is constructed through situated meaning-making, rather than simply mapping onto demographic categories.

Finally, in this chapter I have addressed the fourth question which asks what is the relationship between platform structures and logics and the algorithmic sense-making and social media practices of everyday women-entrepreneurs. Platform structures play an active role in producing difference by amplifying specific modes of self-presentation over others. This amplification privileges certain aesthetics, styles, and practices that align with dominant norms of visibility, making some forms of participation more legible than others within algorithmic systems (Duffy & Hund 2019). Participants frequently referred to “trends” when discussing what content appeared most visible or successful on platforms. These references indicate that some participants were attuned, through their algorithmic sense-making, to the ways in which platforms amplify particular modes of self-presentation.

It is important to acknowledge that trends are mutually constituted by platforms and users. As Gillespie (2014) points out, there is a recursive relationship between “the calculations of the algorithm and the calculations of people” (p. 183). How users orient themselves towards algorithms feeds into algorithmic systems, reinforcing dominant practices and marginalising those who do not or cannot conform. Platform logics embed and intensify existing social hierarchies, leading to some everyday women entrepreneurs being marginalised or excluded. This aligns with Martinez Dy et al.’s (2017) contention that digital technologies do not erase inequalities, but often reproduce and intensify them.

The amplification of particular forms of self-presentation by algorithms is often difficult for users to detect due to the opacity of platform systems. Some participants described struggling to understand why some content styles, such as short-form video, selfies, or trending audio, consistently performed better. This uncertainty reflects the non-transparent nature of algorithmic operations, which makes it difficult to trace how visibility is produced or withheld. This obscuring effect contributes to

the masking of difference, making algorithmic outcomes appear as always the result of personal effort or content quality, rather than platform logics and structural inequalities.

At the same time, postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of digital entrepreneurship reinforce the belief that success on social media is primarily a matter of individual effort, self-confidence, and strategic optimisation (Martinez Dy et al. 2017). As discussed in this chapter, many participants felt that they needed to conform to dominant content styles and consistently apply the 'right' strategies to achieve visibility. In doing so, they framed visibility as a personal responsibility and seemed to be mostly unaware of structural inequalities embedded in platform systems and the broader platform economy. This belief often led participants to feel accountable for their own lack of reach or engagement, even when their experiences were shaped by constraints such as caregiving responsibilities, financial limitations, or marginalisation from dominant aesthetic or cultural norms. In this context, algorithmic sense-making is constructed through normative expectations that reinforce a neoliberal ethos of meritocracy and self-responsibilisation (Gill 2014).

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

Visibility is not only a form of value in the platform economy. It is also an ongoing condition that structures how women entrepreneurs orient themselves to and feel their way through algorithmic systems, and obtain the visibility required to attract clients, generate income, and sustain their businesses. Given the opacity and constantly evolving nature of algorithmic systems, their inner workings are neither fully knowable nor transparently available to any user.

In the context of algorithmic opacity, I argue that everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms by constructing ‘algorithmic vibes’. This concept draws on the contemporary vernacular of vibes (James 2021), and contributes to an emerging body of literature on vibes in relation to digital platforms (Brown et al. 2024; Kender 2022; Lupinacci 2024). Algorithmic vibes are orientations to algorithmic systems that are affective and intuitive, speculative and anticipatory, and situated. They are constructed in response to uncertain and opaque platform environments, and entangled with the social media practices of everyday women entrepreneurs.

Algorithmic vibes are intuitive and affective as they are constructed through participants’ lived experience of platform feedback, perceived fluctuations in visibility, and felt responses to what seems to be working or failing. They develop through participants’ ongoing efforts to get a sense of what “works” on social media, particularly in relation to platform visibility, often without following fixed or formulaic strategies. Algorithmic vibes are also speculative and anticipatory. They reflect participants’ attempts to interpret patterns in engagement, visibility, and feedback, and to anticipate what a platform might reward next. This sense-making is open-ended and continuous. Participants are always in the process of constructing meaning, adjusting their practices, and feeling their way through shifting platform conditions. Finally, algorithmic vibes are situated. The ways in which participants make sense of algorithms, and how this sense-making is enacted through their platform practices, are formed through ongoing engagement with the lived conditions

of entrepreneurship, including how they access and experience algorithmically-governed social media platforms. These conditions often relate to intersecting characteristics such as financial resources, ethnicity, religion, gender, education, professional experience, caring responsibilities, health and dis/ability, and access to support. However, differences in algorithmic sense-making and social media practices do not always map predictably onto these social categories. Instead, divergences also reflect personal values, professional goals, and affective responses that cannot be neatly attributed to structural position, yet significantly inform how participants navigate platform dynamics. The concept of algorithmic vibes captures how everyday women entrepreneurs navigate algorithmic opacity by making meaning through feeling, orientation, and ongoing practice.

In my thesis, I present a sociological account of a particular form of platform labour that centres intuition, speculation, anticipation, and the affective conditions of entrepreneurial practice in the platform economy. I draw attention to the structural conditions and everyday pressures under which visibility is pursued, negotiated, and experienced by everyday women entrepreneurs navigating opaque and shifting platform logics. A central concern throughout the thesis is difference, not only in terms of outcomes, but in the orientations, resources, and constraints that shape how participants construct and act upon algorithmic vibes. In doing so, I challenge meritocratic assumptions that visibility is simply earned through strategy, ability, or effort (such as Best et al 2025), and instead foregrounds the unequal conditions that shape whose content is seen, valued, and rewarded. I also contribute to feminist scholarship by centering the practices of everyday women entrepreneurs, whose forms of platform labour and sense-making have been largely overlooked in existing research on digital labour and entrepreneurship.

This thesis set out to address four research questions:

1. How do everyday women-entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms on a range of social media platforms?
2. What is the nature of the relationship between everyday women-entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and their social media

practices?

3. What differences, if any, exist amongst different everyday women-entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and social media practices?
4. What is the relationship between platform structures and logics and the algorithmic sense-making and social media practices of everyday women-entrepreneurs?

In this chapter I consolidate the central contributions of my thesis and articulate how these contributions advance current debates in feminist platform studies, digital labour, and sociologies of algorithmic culture. I begin by recapping existing literature, specifically highlighting the knowledge gaps that my research aims to address. Next I address my four research questions in turn, through the lens of algorithmic vibes. I discuss how my participants make sense of social media algorithms, and how this sense-making is entangled with their social media practices, affective labour, and efforts to sustain entrepreneurial life under platform conditions. In doing this, I respond to my first and second research questions. I also address how algorithmic sense-making and social media practices are differentiated across social, cultural, and economic positionings, highlighting the uneven conditions under which algorithmic visibility is pursued – this is the focus of my third research question. Finally, I engage with broader platform structures and logics, the focus of my fourth research question. I summarise how participants' algorithmic orientations are shaped by platform structures, governance, and the precarious conditions of entrepreneurial labour in the platform economy.

Following this discussion of my findings, I reflect on the possibilities that might arise when algorithmic vibes are taken up as a way of attending to research encounters, as well as an analytical framework. I go on to discuss the limitations of my research, before suggesting potential directions for future research and engagement.

8.2 Algorithmic Sense-Making: A Recap of Relevant Literature

In this thesis, I have developed a theoretical framework to analyse algorithmic sense-making as an affective and intuitive, speculative and anticipatory, and situated process. This framework draws first on Oman (2021) and Taylor et al. (2024) to conceptualise understanding as a process that moves between knowing and feeling. I then employ Bericat (2016) and Gregg and Seigworth's (2010) work on emotions, feeling, and affect, along with Ahmed's (2006) concept of orientation to understand how feelings work to orient individuals toward certain actions and possibilities. I incorporate feminist accounts of intuition (Pedwell 2017) that frame understanding and affect as entangled, facilitating a way of knowing that is grounded in embodied, situated engagements with platform conditions.

These intuitive responses are patterned by habitus (Bourdieu 1990), which I use to conceptualise the embodied and historical dispositions that shape what feels viable or strategic when navigating platform conditions. My framework also incorporates the concept of platform atmospheres (Anderson 2009; Ash 2013; Lupton 2017) to account for the ambient, affective qualities of platforms. Finally, I draw on Coleman's (2018) infra-structures of feeling to situate algorithmic sense-making within the affective temporality of platforms: an always-unfolding present marked by anticipation, ambiguity, and the promise of reward. Taken together, these concepts provide the foundation for my development of algorithmic vibes as a conceptual tool that brings these processes into analytical focus.

This framing resists narrowing sense-making to questions of what women entrepreneurs know, believe, or assume about algorithms. Instead, it attends to how their sense-making unfolds through lived experience, affective orientation and habitual engagement.

In the remainder of this section, I provide a brief overview of the existing literature that I engaged with in Chapter Two (Literature Review). I identify several relevant knowledge gaps and explain how each of my four research questions emerged from the literature review and relate to these gaps.

Existing literature that relates to algorithmic sense-making offers valuable insights into how people think about, feel, and discuss algorithms, and how these understandings influence their platform practices.

The concept of socio-technical imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim 2016) highlights how collectively held visions of what technologies are, and what they should do, shape how societies engage with emerging systems. Such imaginaries form part of the wider socio-technical environment in which platform users, including everyday women entrepreneurs, make sense of social media algorithms, shaping what they believe algorithms are for, who they benefit, and how they function in everyday life (Hendriks et al. 2025). Algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher 2018) shift attention to how platform users become aware of algorithms and construct understandings of their operations; how these understandings are affectively felt; and how such imaginaries inform users' practices in ways that may influence platform logics. Studies of collective speculation (Schellewald 2022; Siles et al 2020; Bishop 2019; MacDonald 2021) demonstrate how algorithmic sense-making is often a social process, grounded in informal conversations and everyday knowledge exchange about perceived patterns in visibility. Meanwhile, research on visibility strategies (Cotter 2019; Abidin 2016; O'Meara 2019) shows how users adapt their practices in anticipation of platform logics, experimenting with different tactics with the aim of maximising their platform visibility.

These accounts have a number of limitations. Literature on socio-technical imaginaries foreground public narratives and cultural representations of algorithms, often focusing on political or institutional visions of technological futures (Jasanoff and Kim 2016; Hendriks et al. 2025). While these perspectives are valuable for understanding how algorithmic systems are imagined and narrated at a societal level, they tend to overlook how meaning is constructed by users, especially through everyday practice.

Bucher's (2017; 2018) concept of the algorithmic imaginary draws attention to the role of affect and lived experience in algorithmic sense-making, showing how users feel their way through platforms and how ideas about algorithms shape user practices. However, the algorithmic imaginary emphasises moments when

algorithms become noticeable, typically when they disrupt expectations, generate surprise, or produce discomfort. Such moments illuminate how algorithmic power is encountered, but less attention is paid to the cumulative processes through which people learn to navigate algorithmic systems in everyday life. Likewise, research on collective speculation about algorithms, as in gossip (Bishop 2019), folk theories (Siles et al 2022) and stories (Schellewald 2022), concentrates on discursive and interpretive practices, that is, what users say and share about algorithms, over the quieter and often pre-reflective ways that people orient themselves to platform logics. This body of literature offers valuable insights into how users talk about, interpret, and react to algorithms. However, algorithmic vibes extends these discussions by accounting for the quieter, often intuitive ways in which participants constructed orientations to platform algorithms, even when they did not explicitly name or discuss algorithms themselves.

A number of studies have drawn attention to the uneven conditions under which visibility is pursued in the platform economy. Duffy and Hund (2019) highlight how online visibility is experienced in deeply uneven ways. Additionally, they highlight how, for women entrepreneurs, the pursuit of visibility involves both mastering digital skills and navigating gendered demands around self-presentation, affective display, and entrepreneurial legitimacy. Bishop (2018) demonstrates how YouTube privileges hegemonic, feminised outputs created by beauty vloggers with significant cultural and social capital. Duffy and Meisner (2022) similarly show that platform governance is enacted in uneven ways, which disadvantages marginalised creators who pursue platform visibility. These studies suggest that women and marginalised entrepreneurs have to engage in additional labour that is often emotionally demanding.

Additionally, this body of literature emphasises the importance of attending to structural inequalities that shape access to online visibility. The labour involved with being visible online is often intensified for those operating under intersecting forms of precarity, such as limited economic resources, caregiving responsibilities, or racialised marginalisation (Martinez Dy et al. 2017). Yet there is an absence of studies that focus specifically on the algorithmic sense-making and digital practices of everyday women entrepreneurs. My thesis contributes to this body of work as I

argue that intersecting characteristics, including financial resources, race and ethnicity, education, professional experience, caring and domestic responsibilities, health and dis/ability and access to support affect everyday women entrepreneurs' sense-making, how they orient themselves to platform logics, and what visibility practices feel viable.

A number of studies into digital entrepreneurship practices and algorithmic sense-making consider the role of platform structures and logics (e.g. Duffy 2020; Duffy and Meisner 2022; Petre, Duffy and Hund 2019; Cotter 2019). Building on these existing studies, my thesis attends closely to the relationship between everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making, their social media practices and platform structures and logics - the focus of my fourth research question.

In addition to these conceptual gaps, there is a lack of research that attends to the algorithmic sense-making of everyday women entrepreneurs. Existing literature has tended to focus on a specific subset of entrepreneurs, particularly social media influencers and professional content creators (e.g. Bishop 2023; Glatt 2022; Duffy 2019), whose livelihood depends on maintaining large online followings and leveraging visibility to generate income (Abidin 2016). While this literature provides valuable insight into how visibility is negotiated under platform capitalism, it overlooks everyday women entrepreneurs - a vast group of entrepreneurs who use social media to sustain small businesses, often without employees, and whose labour is not oriented toward content creation as a professional identity. Unlike influencers or professional content creators, whose revenue depends on producing and monetising platform-optimised content (Bishop 2019), everyday women entrepreneurs use social media as a tool to attract clients, promote their work, or support offline service and product-based businesses. As such, the labour involved in their algorithmic sense-making must be understood in relation to the social and material constraints that shape their entrepreneurial practices. By centering this under-researched group, the thesis extends existing accounts of digital labour and algorithmic sense-making, highlighting how platform participation is not only affectively charged, but structured by the everyday conditions of women's self-employment.

My thesis contributes to feminist media studies and the sociology of labour by extending existing analyses of affective and visibility labour (Gill 2010; Duffy 2017; Banet-Weiser 2018; Bennet 2024) to account for how women entrepreneurs interpret and navigate algorithmic systems. Through the concept of algorithmic vibes, I foreground the affective, intuitive, and situated dimensions of algorithmic sense-making practices, showing how they form part of women's everyday labour of maintaining visibility and viability on social media platforms. In doing so, my thesis highlights how algorithmic conditions contribute to what digital labour entails and how it feels, further embedding affect and experience within accounts of women's work in platform economies.

8.3 Algorithmic Vibes: A Feminist Framework for Understanding Algorithmic Sense-Making and Practice

Building on my analysis of empirical data, I develop the concept of algorithmic vibes as a feminist framework for understanding how everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of social media algorithms. Everyday women entrepreneurs are a specific group of online entrepreneurs that are mostly overlooked in existing literature. Algorithmic vibes is an original framework that foregrounds the entanglement between algorithmic sense-making and everyday practices. It highlights how participants construct meaning through intuitive, partial, and often uncertain engagements with platform systems, and how this sense-making both informs and is informed by the practices of everyday women entrepreneurs.

I argue that algorithmic vibes offers a feminist framework for understanding the algorithmic sense-making of everyday women entrepreneurs because it centres forms of knowledge that are often marginalised within dominant epistemological hierarchies (Collins 1990; Haraway 1988). Specifically, it attends to intuitive, speculative, and sometimes unarticulated ways of knowing that are constructed through lived experience and affective orientation, rather than through explicit reasoning. Additionally, algorithmic vibes are continuously constructed and reconstructed through participants' everyday engagements with platform dynamics. They are not discrete moments of insight but ongoing orientations that may carry

ambiguity, contradiction, or multiple meanings at once. This position aligns with feminist epistemologies which challenge dominant knowledge hierarchies that position institutional expertise as more legitimate than experiential, intuitive, or affective forms of knowing (Code 1991; Harding 1987; Alcoff and Potter 1993). It is also informed by Black feminist scholarship that critiques the racialised dynamics of knowledge production and highlights how dominant epistemologies have historically excluded and devalued the lived knowledge of marginalised women (Collins 1990). By resisting these hierarchies, algorithmic vibes centres the legitimacy of participants' partial, hesitant, and affectively charged accounts, as a meaningful mode of algorithmic sense-making.

In the remainder of this section, I demonstrate how the concept of algorithmic vibes provides an analytical response to each of my four research questions.

Research Question One: How do everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms on a range of social media platforms?

Algorithmic vibes are orientations constructed through the process of algorithmic sense-making. As such, they reflect the diverse and affectively charged ways that everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of algorithms across different social media platforms. In this thesis, I conceptualise algorithmic vibes as having three interrelated dimensions: they are affective and intuitive (Chapter Five), speculative and anticipatory (Chapter Six), and situated (Chapter Seven). In response to Research Question One, I draw particularly on the first two dimensions.

In Chapter Five I argued that algorithmic vibes are affective and intuitive orientations to algorithmic systems. Participants' responses to questions about social media algorithms were frequently marked by hesitation, humility, and curiosity. Several participants acknowledged that they had never given algorithms much thought prior to the interview, or that they felt unsure about their own understanding. This uncertainty reflected the affective dimensions of their algorithmic sense-making and an orientation that was often intuitive, tentative, and developed through ongoing lived experience. Many participants described "trial and error" as their primary approach to figuring out what "works" on social media. The phrase "trial and error" captures a

process of experimentation informed by perceived outcomes, where patterns of visibility or engagement were felt and reflected upon over time. These accounts resonate with Bourdieu's (1990) notion of practical mastery, in which understanding is cultivated through repetition, familiarity, and embodied responsiveness, rather than explicit instruction or codified rules. Participants developed a 'feel for the game' through exposure to the fluctuating dynamics of platform visibility, forming impressions of what might be effective, worthwhile, or unsustainable.

Participants' sense-making was shaped by their affective responses to platform feedback, particularly feelings of disappointment, relief, encouragement, or exhaustion. This informed decisions about when to persist, adapt, or selectively withdraw from particular practices or features. Some chose to step back from features that no longer seemed to be working, based on a felt sense of misalignment between effort and outcome. Others described sensing subtle shifts in platform atmospheres, such as noticing that a certain kind of content no longer seemed to circulate as effectively, or that different platforms felt faster or slower in terms of how long posts circulated. This relates to my theoretical framework, where I draw on Anderson (2009), Ash (2013), and Lupton (2017) to conceptualise platform atmospheres as affective and ambient conditions that emerge through ongoing interactions between users, algorithms, and platform environments.

In this context, participants' algorithmic sense-making involved affective attunement and practical responsiveness to the temporal instability and variability of platform outcomes, through which algorithmic vibes were constructed. Algorithmic vibes, as I conceptualise them, are orientations toward platform algorithms. I conceptualise algorithmic vibes as orientations toward platform algorithms that are intuitively felt, responsive, and developed through lived conditions. Drawing on Ahmed (2006), I use orientation to capture how participants lean toward certain strategies, practices, or possibilities based on what feels viable or valuable from their position within the platform economy. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that algorithmic vibes are grounded in intuitive and affective orientations to platform dynamics. These orientations, or algorithmic vibes, are constructed through accumulated feeling, ongoing engagement, and adaptive response.

In Chapter Six I develop the concept of algorithmic vibes further, arguing that algorithmic vibes are speculative and anticipatory orientations to platform algorithms. I do this by examining how participants engage with platform data, particularly metrics such as reach, likes, comments, and views. Due to the opacity of algorithms, it was common for participants to make sense of platform algorithms by interpreting metrics as partial signals of what the platform might be rewarding.

Participants interpreted metrics in relation to perceived patterns in visibility, developing anticipatory orientations toward what might “work” in the future. In this way, data became entangled with algorithmic sense-making, offering fleeting and uncertain clues that informed participants’ ongoing adjustments and strategic decision-making. These forms of engagement foreground the speculative labour involved in navigating opaque systems, as participants read platform metrics as both reflections of past performance and as signs of what to try next.

Although the focus of Chapter Six is on the speculative and anticipatory dimensions of algorithmic vibes, these orientations were closely entangled with affect. Participants engaged with metrics as affectively charged signals that carried emotional weight and personal significance. For many, platform metrics such as reach, likes, and comments triggered affective responses ranging from disappointment to fleeting feelings of validation, which in turn contributed to their sense of what platforms appeared to value. These responses forward-facing as they influenced how participants anticipated future platform behaviour, guiding their decisions about what to post, when, and how often.

As I show in Section 6.3.2, affective responses to metrics often prompted practices of adjustment, withdrawal, or redefinition of success. One common site of this redefinition was the distinction participants drew between so-called “vanity metrics”, such as likes, reach, and follower counts, and forms of engagement that felt more relational or substantive, including comments and Direct Messages (DMs). For many, metrics associated with meaningful connection were experienced as more trustworthy signals of resonance or success than abstract numerical growth. This

divergence highlights how affective responses to data were also shaped by how participants speculated about what kinds of visibility were worth pursuing.

These findings align with Kennedy and Hill's (2018) assertion that data is felt, and emotions play a pivotal role in how users make sense of metrics. By engaging with metrics affectively, participants were also engaging in speculative interpretations of platform logics, highlighting how affective, speculative and anticipatory orientations are co-constructed within algorithmic vibes.

Research Question Two: What is the nature of the relationship between everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and their social media practices?

I argue that algorithmic sense-making does not occur separately from participants' social media practices, nor can their practices be fully understood without attending to the forms of sense-making through which they are constructed. My analysis shows that algorithmic sense-making and social media practices are co-constitutive and entangled. This framing is central to my conceptualisation of algorithmic vibes. As orientations toward platform algorithms, algorithmic vibes encompass how participants engage with, adapt, or withdraw from specific practices in response as well as how they feel and make sense of platform logics. Practices are part of the orientation, as expressions of and contributors to participants' ongoing sense-making. In this way, algorithmic vibes captures how sense-making is enacted through situated, responsive, and often habitual forms of platform labour, terms which I now go on to discuss.

Participants' algorithmic sense-making and social media practices are grounded in the everyday demands of sustaining visibility. Their practices were responsive in the sense that participants made adjustments based on what felt currently possible, worthwhile, or aligned with platform conditions, often guided by previous experiences of reach, engagement, or feedback. For example, some participants described spacing out posts to improve their visibility and avoid platform penalties, reusing formats that had previously worked, or selectively withdrawing from certain features when visibility seemed to drop, even if they were uncertain why. At the same time, sense-making was also habitual, as it unfolded through repeated engagements with

platforms, in which participants developed a feel for what worked through accumulated trial and error. These habitual engagements reflect what Bourdieu (1990) refers to as practical mastery, meaning forms of intuitive know-how that are not necessarily articulated, but which inform practice through routine and familiarity.

It is important to note that participants' practices did not always develop in a steady or cumulative way. Some described reverting to earlier content formats, stepping back from platform experimentation, or persisting with practices despite ambivalence or uncertainty about their effectiveness. These non-linear forms of adaptation highlight that algorithmic vibes are constructed through cyclical and affectively informed processes that include pauses, scepticism, and temporary disengagement. This further affirms that algorithmic sense-making and practice unfold through complex rhythms of effort, doubt, and adjustment, rather than through clear trajectories of learning or mastery.

Together, these findings demonstrate that algorithmic vibes are constructed through concrete, everyday decisions about how, when, and where to engage with platform practices.

Research Question Three: What differences, if any, exist amongst different everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making and social media practices?

The third dimension of algorithmic vibes is that they are situated. That is, they are constructed through the lived conditions of participants' entrepreneurial practice, shaped by the social, economic, cultural, and infrastructural positions from which participants engage with social media platforms. As I have shown throughout this thesis, algorithmic sense-making is related to participants' experiences of work, care, and identity. Existing scholarship has demonstrated that platform visibility is unevenly distributed, and the demands of visibility labour are intensified for those operating under intersecting forms of precarity (Duffy and Meisner 2022; Martinez Dy et al. 2017). Building on this analysis, I argue that algorithmic vibes are constructed in uneven ways that are affected by participants' access to time, technical skill, peer networks, financial resources, caregiving responsibilities, and cultural or religious values.

These differences affect how participants came to understand and relate to platform algorithms, as well as what practices they felt able or willing to engage in. For example, some participants with caregiving responsibilities described limiting their engagement in algorithmic sense-making and adapting their social media practices to fit around family demands. Others reflected on how racialised platform norms shaped both what they saw on social media and how they were seen, describing the need to invest additional time and effort in curating their feeds so that they could locate and connect with their target audiences, particularly those who “look like them”, in ways that felt affirming and strategically viable. These practices were grounded not only in concerns about visibility but also in a felt sense of exclusion from platform norms.

My analysis draws on Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of habitus, as outlined in Chapter Three (Theoretical Framework) to account for how algorithmic vibes are constructed in relation to participants’ histories and embodied dispositions. Habitus refers to the embodied dispositions that are acquired through past experience and that inform practices, often in nonconscious ways. As explained in Chapter Three, I consider habitus alongside Haraway’s (1988) concept of situated knowledge to conceptualise algorithmic vibes as situated orientations that are constructed through lived experience and entangled with broader systems of power, including gendered, racialised, and classed structures. In this way, I frame I attend to how algorithmic vibes are formed through the social, cultural, and economic locations that participants occupy and the conditions under which they pursue visibility.

Research Question Four: What is the relationship between platform structures and logics and the algorithmic sense-making and social media practices of everyday women entrepreneurs?

Finally, I argue that algorithmic vibes are constructed through broader platform structures and logics of platform governance that organise participation and visibility online. These structures include the opaque operation of algorithms, data feedback mechanisms, and the affordances and thresholds that condition access to visibility, monetisation, and perceived success. I argue that these platform structures and logics are integral to how participants come to understand algorithms and decide

how to act in relation to them. Algorithmic vibes, in this sense, are constructed not only through felt responses to platform dynamics, but through ongoing encounters with the infrastructural and economic logics that shape what is rendered legible, valuable, or actionable on social media platforms.

Algorithmic vibes constructed in relation to the affective atmospheres of the platforms they move through. I posit that participants attuned to the fluctuating atmospheres of platform spaces through felt impressions of what kinds of content were currently being promoted, deprioritised, or ignored. Drawing on the work of Anderson (2009), Ash (2013), and Lupton (2017), I use understanding of affective digital atmospheres to analyse how algorithmically-governed platform environments feel, as well as how everyday women entrepreneurs make sense of and respond to them. This is based on an understanding of digital atmospheres as ambient and affective conditions that form through the ongoing interactions between users, algorithms, and the platform environment. Participants' responses often suggested a felt sense of platform atmospheres, particularly in terms of what felt rewarding, demanding, fast-paced, or crowded. In this context, algorithmic vibes are constructed through participants' orientation to these platform atmospheres; a process that involves feeling their way through unstable and affectively charged environments.

Platform structures also shape users' sense of what counts as important or meaningful data, which is critical to algorithmic sense-making because it informs how participants interpret feedback, evaluate their visibility, and decide how to act on perceived signals from the platform. As Zheng (2024) argues, platforms use certain structures and affordances, such as dashboards, visualisations, and notifications, to orient users toward particular evaluative practices. As discussed in Chapter Six, participants encountered data primarily through platform-curated dashboards, which foreground particular metrics such as reach, engagement, and follower growth. However, many participants chose to focus on select metrics which they primarily accessed at a post-level, rather than through platform dashboards. This practice allowed them to focus on specific signals they felt mattered most to their goals or priorities. Yet even these acts of selective attention were constrained by platform design. The metrics most readily visible at the post level - likes, comments, reach -

tended to be the very ones that participants reported valuing most. This highlights how platforms shape users' perceptions of what counts as meaningful or legitimate data (Beer 2016; Zheng 2024), subtly influencing algorithmic sense-making through interface design and feedback structures. Algorithmic vibes, in this context, were constructed through what platforms rendered legible, visible, and actionable, as well as participants' own priorities and values.

Beyond shaping which forms of data are made visible and valuable, platform structures and logics also contribute to the aspirations and orientations of everyday women entrepreneurs. Thresholds and affordances, such as follower counts, engagement rates, or monetisation eligibility, were understood by some participants as gateways to visibility, credibility, or financial return. These thresholds informed participants' algorithmic sense-making, particularly among those seeking access to features such as live broadcasting or opportunities to monetise their content, that is to generate income directly from a platform. In this context, metrics functioned simultaneously as disciplinary mechanisms (Chan 2022), sources of hope, and the focus of aspirational labour (Duffy 2016). These dynamics contributed to the construction of algorithmic vibes as speculative, anticipatory, and affective orientations to platform promises, sustaining engagement even amid uncertainty and precarity.

The findings presented across all four research questions support my conceptualisation of algorithmic vibes as a feminist framework for understanding the algorithmic sense-making and practices of everyday women entrepreneurs. Algorithmic vibes capture the affective and intuitive, speculative and anticipatory, and situated ways in which everyday women entrepreneurs orient themselves and their practices around platform algorithms. It accounts for the recursive and entangled relationship between participants' algorithmic sense-making and social media practices. By foregrounding these orientations, my thesis offers an account of algorithmic sense-making that centres the complex, uneven, and contingent ways that algorithmic systems are navigated in everyday entrepreneurial life.

8.4 Vibes as Method

This section offers a set of reflections on what it might mean to think with vibes not only as a concept, but as a way of doing research. Emerging from the findings of this study, and grounded in a feminist commitment to valuing situated, affective, and tentative forms of knowledge, *vibes as method* offers a way of attending to the uncertainties and embodied dimensions of meaning-making in the platform economy.

Throughout the thesis, I have argued that everyday women entrepreneurs' algorithmic sense-making is not reducible to strategic action or technical mastery, but emerges through situated and affectively charged forms of engagement with algorithmically-governed platforms. This recognition challenges dominant epistemic hierarchies that privilege confident, codifiable, or formally articulated knowledge, and invites methodological approaches that can remain open to ambiguity, ambivalence, and embodied knowing. Vibes as method begins from the premise that to understand how people navigate opaque and unstable systems, we must take seriously the felt, situated, and partial ways in which meaning is sensed, constructed, and shared. This builds on existing feminist epistemological work that foregrounds lived experience, affect, and partial knowledge as legitimate and analytically meaningful (see for example Haraway 1988; Collins 1990; Code 1991).

The primary mode of data collection in this study was semi-structured interviews, which I approached as sites of collaborative meaning-making between researcher and participant. Drawing on Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) conception of the interview as a space where meaning is co-produced, I understood participants' reflections as shaped by the relational dynamics of the interview setting and the broader discursive context in which knowledge about algorithms is produced. Informed by feminist ethics of care and epistemic justice (Harding 1987; Code 1991), I was attentive to the risk of reproducing hierarchies that privilege technical or expert understandings of algorithms over the lived, affective, or intuitive insights that might be offered by participants. Rather than treating algorithmic knowledge as a matter of accuracy or completeness, I aimed to create a conversational space in which hesitation, uncertainty, and embodied forms of sense-making were recognised as both valid and analytically significant. In many interviews, participants' reflections on algorithms and visibility did not arise as pre-formed theories but emerged through the

act of speaking; often tentatively, affectively, and in ways grounded in their everyday platform practices.

At the same time, I have noted in this thesis how power dynamics may have shaped the meaning-making process. Some participants appeared to express a sense of epistemic vulnerability (Johnson 2023), by which I mean a sense of being asked to speak about something that felt important but was difficult to name, explain, or claim authority over. This was particularly apparent when answering direct questions about algorithms, as participants often hesitated, sought reassurance, or expressed uncertainty about whether their responses were “right.” Drawing on Bourdieu (1990), I understand this not simply as a lack of confidence, but as a reflection of how habitus and prior experience shape what individuals recognise as legitimate knowledge, and by extension, what they feel authorised or entitled to speak about. I approached this vulnerability not as a barrier to insight, but as an important part of the affective and social conditions under which algorithmic sense-making is expressed and negotiated.

Despite my commitment to feminist research ethics and my efforts to create a conversational space grounded in care and epistemic justice, I do not believe it was entirely possible to overcome the power dynamics at play in the interview setting. As a PhD researcher, I may have been viewed by participants as someone with greater expertise or authority, particularly in relation to algorithms and social media. Participants were also aware of my background as a digital marketing professional, and several already knew of my prior professional work as a social media marketing trainer, having previously encountered it online. This may have influenced how some participants framed their responses, and might have contributed to moments of hesitation or deferral. Indeed, it was common for participants to ask if their answers were “right” or apologise for what they felt was a lack of knowledge or understanding. While I aimed to affirm the value of participants’ everyday insights and to resist reproducing epistemic hierarchies, I remain conscious of how my own positioning shaped the knowledge that was co-produced in the research encounter. What distinguishes *vibes* as method, however, is not simply the affirmation of participants’ everyday knowledge, but the analytic commitment to attending to the tentative, affective, and sometimes ambiguous ways in which that knowledge is constructed

and expressed. Rather than prioritising clarity or coherence, I remained attuned to hesitations, provisional language, and affective atmospheres within the research encounter, recognising these as part of the meaning-making process rather than evidence of a lack of knowledge.

Additionally, although the interviews were valuable sites of meaning-making, they inevitably captured only how participants thought and felt in that particular moment. Algorithmic vibes, however, are not fixed states but fluctuating orientations that are entangled with platform feedback, evolving personal circumstances, and shifting priorities. A small number of participants chose to remain in touch after the interviews, occasionally sharing reflections or updates about their social media practices and algorithmic sense-making. These voluntary exchanges revealed how participants' algorithmic sense-making changed often and highlighted the temporal and affective volatility of platform participation. This suggests that a longitudinal approach would offer valuable insight into the fluctuations and reorientations of algorithmic vibes over time.

In this study, follow-up engagement was left open and participant-led; individuals could choose if, when, and how to remain in contact. I view this as an ethical approach, as it respects participants' time, energy, and shifting capacities, particularly for women whose entrepreneurial lives are shaped by competing demands and structural constraints. At the same time, I remain mindful that epistemic vulnerability may have limited participants' willingness to re-engage. Some may not have felt that what they had to share was valuable, or may not have recognised their own sense-making and affective orientations until asked to articulate them. Moreover, the nature of vibes themselves - subtle, felt, often unexamined and unarticulated - means that participants may not notice or name them until prompted. Attending to these silences, hesitations, and absences is therefore central to vibes as method, and speaks to the ongoing need for research approaches that are attuned to the partial, recursive, and situated character of everyday algorithmic sense-making.

8.5 Limitations

This study does not include trans or non-binary participants, and I recognise this as a significant limitation. As discussed in Chapter Four, this absence reflects both structural challenges in recruitment and broader issues of safety, visibility, and trust that shape trans and non-binary individuals' participation in research. Despite targeted outreach to LGBTQ+ organisations and business communities, these efforts did not lead to inclusion in the final sample. This absence limits the thesis's capacity to account for how algorithmic sense-making may be affected by trans or non-binary experiences of visibility and marginalisation on digital platforms, a particularly important gap given the unique and often compounded forms of risk that trans and non-binary people face online (Duffy & Meisner 2022; Haimson & Hoffman 2016). Future research should prioritise ethical, inclusive methodologies that attend to these dynamics and create safer pathways for participation.

Although I encountered methodological challenges with participant observation, as discussed in Chapter Four, a small amount of relevant data was collected through this method, which helped to deepen my analysis. During interviews, several participants mentioned their involvement in closed online communities, such as paid Slack or Discord groups, where social media strategy and algorithmic visibility were regularly discussed. These spaces would offer valuable opportunities for observing algorithmic sense-making in group settings, but I was not able to gain access during the research period. Future research could focus specifically on participant observation within such digital spaces.

It may also be beneficial to conduct participant observation in offline spaces, such as networking meetings or women-in-business events, as conversations about online visibility and algorithmic systems do not only occur online. I considered this in my research design, but ultimately decided to use such events only for recruitment, not data collection, due to ethical concerns. Based on my prior experience in these settings, I recognised that women often use these events to seek moral support, including sharing personal and emotionally sensitive experiences. Being present in these spaces as an observer would have raised significant ethical issues and risked compromising the supportive nature of those environments.

8.6 Future Research and Engagement

The experiences of everyday women entrepreneurs working within the platform economy draw attention to a set of conditions marked by precarity, opacity, and affective labour. These conditions shape how women make sense of algorithms, how they sustain their digital practices, and how they navigate the pursuit of visibility in environments that offer few guarantees. By examining how women make sense of and respond to algorithmic systems under these conditions, I have highlighted the everyday, relational, and affectively charged forms of labour that sustain entrepreneurial participation but are under-recognised in formal accounts of business activity or entrepreneurial support. As Ozkazanc-Pan and Muntean (2022) argue, entrepreneurial policies and support structures often fail to address the specific needs of entrepreneurs with intersecting identities. This research adds to such critiques by showing how platform infrastructures and algorithmic governance shape not only what is possible for women entrepreneurs to achieve, but how they are expected to perform visibility, manage energy, and absorb risk, often without meaningful institutional recognition or tailored support.

As discussed, several participants described engaging with social media training or business support initiatives, often provided by independent “experts” or local enterprise schemes. However, these forms of support were sometimes described as repetitive, overly generic, or of limited practical use, particularly when they failed to account for the specific conditions in which participants were operating. The findings of this study point to the potential value of support and training that recognises the intuitive, affective, and situated ways that everyday women entrepreneurs engage in platform labour. Rather than relying on best-practice models that presume a universal path to visibility or success, such support might draw on the concept of algorithmic vibes to offer more reflexive and responsive frameworks, that attend to the affective costs of visibility work, and the uneven distribution of risk within digital economies.

These findings signal that a “one size fits all” approach to entrepreneurial support not only risks falling short, but may actively compound exclusion. To truly support women in digital entrepreneurship, it is vital to recognise difference; not as a

challenge to be overcome or a problem to be fixed, but as a starting point for reimagining how visibility, value, and success are understood and enabled on digital platforms. As discussed in the literature review, dominant approaches to encouraging women's entrepreneurship often frame women as lacking - in confidence, ambition, or skills - and seek to "fix" or "makeover" so that they can compete on equal terms with men (Lewis 2006; Martinez Dy and Marlow 2017). This study contributes to critiques of that framing by showing that many women are already navigating digital entrepreneurship with ingenuity, adaptability, and care. What they need is not to be made more competitive or optimised, but to have their labour recognised, their constraints understood, and their practices supported on their own terms.

Additionally, future research could extend the concept of algorithmic vibes across different platform contexts and user groups. While this study focused on social media platforms, marketplace platforms such as Etsy and Amazon operate with different forms of algorithmic governance and visibility regimes. Exploring how entrepreneurs make sense of ranking systems, recommendation engines, and platform feedback in those contexts could help to develop a more nuanced understanding of algorithmic sense-making across platform types. Similarly, while my study focused on women entrepreneurs, the analytic lens of algorithmic vibes may also prove valuable for understanding how men, trans and non-binary entrepreneurs navigate the affective and embodied dimensions of platform labour.

My thesis also opens up questions about how users are beginning to navigate new forms of automation and AI-driven tools. During the interview period, which coincided with the public release and rapid uptake of ChatGPT in late 2022 (Forbes 2023), a number of participants began to reflect on the potential of generative AI tools to support their social media practices. For some, these tools offered efficiency and inspiration; for others, they were met with caution or uncertainty. Future research could investigate whether vibes is a useful framework for exploring how entrepreneurs, particularly those operating under conditions of constraint, make sense of emerging AI tools, and how these tools are being adopted, adapted, or resisted in ways that are affective, intuitive, and situated.

8.7 Conclusion

This thesis has shown that, for everyday women entrepreneurs, algorithmic sense-making is a deeply affective, situated, and unequal practice, and not merely a matter of technical understanding or strategic adaptation. By centering the lived experiences of everyday women entrepreneurs and developing the concept of algorithmic vibes, I have offered a sociological framework for attending to the forms of labour, orientation, and adaptation that unfold under opaque and unstable platform conditions. This research contributes to wider efforts to challenge dominant framings of digital entrepreneurship that obscure structural inequalities and undervalue affective labour. As platform systems continue to evolve, and as new forms of automation shape the conditions of entrepreneurial life, it remains crucial to recognise how people feel their way through these systems, not only as a matter of academic interest, but as a question of justice, inclusion, and possibility.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview participant information sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Interview Participant

Project Title: *Self-employed womens' understandings of social media algorithms*

You are invited to participate in a research project which explores how self-employed women understand social media algorithms, how this affects the ways in which they use social media and the differences that might exist between different women.

This is a PhD project being conducted by Rebecca Ruddock, a PhD student in the Department of Sociological Studies at The University of Sheffield.

Before you decide whether or not you are willing to participate, it is important that you understand why the research is being carried out and what will be involved. Please read the following information carefully before making your decision. If you have any questions please contact me.

What is the project's purpose?

Algorithms are used by social media platforms for a variety of purposes, including recommending content and people to follow and deciding who to show your posts to. Many self-employed women use social media to market their businesses but not much is known about how they attempt to understand algorithms nor how their

understanding of algorithms influences their social media practices. This project aims to find out more about this and explore whether any differences exist between different women.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen to participate in this study because you are a self-employed woman, based in the UK, who uses social media.

Do I have to take part?

It is your choice as to whether you take part or not. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form.

If you change your mind at any time, you are free to withdraw from the project without any negative consequences. You do not have to give a reason. If you wish

to withdraw from the research, please contact reruddock1@sheffield.ac.uk. You can also choose not to answer any of the questions during the interview.

Please note that by choosing to participate in this research, this will not create a legally binding agreement, nor is it intended to create an employment relationship between you and the University of Sheffield.

What will happen to me if I take part? What do I have to do?

You will participate in an interview which will be conducted in-person or online, depending on your preference. The interview will last approximately 30 - 90 minutes. During the interview we will talk about how you use social media to market your business, the steps you take to improve your visibility on social media and your thoughts and feelings about social media algorithms.

If we meet in person, I will record the audio during our interview for later analysis. If we meet online, video and audio will be recorded. The audio will be separated from the video file after the interview and only audio will be saved. If you choose to share your screen with me during the interview I will take screenshots of the content you show on screen before deleting the video file. You can ask for the interview not to be recorded, in which case I will make detailed notes of our conversation. No one outside of the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

After the interview, you will be invited to contact me via messaging apps and / or email at any time during the research period should you have additional insights or experiences you would like to share with me. I will also ask if it is OK for me to contact you if I have any follow up questions.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to myself and my supervisors. You will not be personally identified in any reports or publications. With your consent, comments made by you in the interview will be quoted in future reports and publications and a pseudonym will be used so that your identity remains confidential.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

It is hoped that this work will benefit women in business by helping academics, policymakers and organisations that support business women to better understand the unique challenges that women face when using social media to market their businesses.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

Although this project is considered low risk, it does deal with issues to do with gender inequality within the context of work. This could mean that we end up talking about sensitive topics in your interview, such as discrimination or harassment. You are free to stop the interview or choose not to answer a question at any point. If you

feel you need support following the interview, I can provide contact details for third party organisations who can help.

What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

According to data protection legislation, I am required to inform you that the legal basis I am applying in order to process your data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

Interview recordings, transcriptions and field notes will be stored on a secure, encrypted Google Drive provided by the University of Sheffield. Recordings will be deleted from the original recording device once transferred to Google Drive. The recording will be transcribed and deleted within two months of the interview taking place. The transcript will be pseudonymised so that it contains no personal identifying information. It will then be used for data analysis purposes.

I will keep one matrix of participant pseudonyms which will be stored in my University Google Drive separate from all other research data. I will be the only person with access to this matrix. This matrix will be destroyed upon completion of the project.

The results of this project will be included in my PhD thesis and potentially in future academic journal articles and conference presentations. With your consent anonymised data will be archived in the University of Sheffield data repository (ORDA).

Who is the Data Controller?

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the Department of Sociological Studies.

What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research or report a concern or incident?

If you are dissatisfied with any aspect of the research and wish to make a complaint, please contact my supervisor Dr Harrison Smith - harrison.smith@sheffield.ac.uk in the first instance. If you feel your complaint has not been handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of the Department of Sociological Studies: Professor Nathan Hughes – nathan.hughes@sheffield.ac.uk

If the complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

Contact for further information

Please feel free to contact me, Rebecca Ruddock, if you have any other questions or would like to find out more about the project. My email address is reruddock1@sheffield.ac.uk

You can also contact my project Supervisor Dr Harrison Smith. His email address is: harrison.smith@sheffield.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this information.

Appendix 2: Recruitment flyer



Are you a self-employed woman who uses social media to market your business?

Would you be interested in being interviewed for a PhD research project which aims to benefit women in business?

My name is Rebecca Ruddock and I am a PhD student at The University of Sheffield. I'm looking to speak with self-employed women who use social media to market their businesses. I'm especially interested to hear about the steps you take to be more visible on social media.



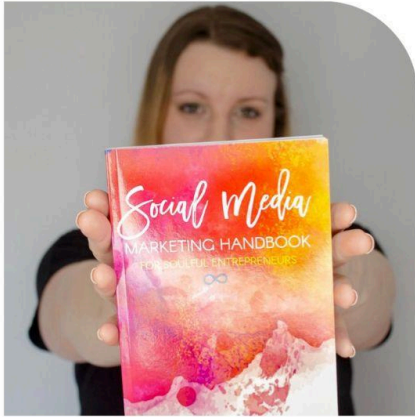
WHAT'S INVOLVED?

If you decide to take part, the interview will take between 30 - 90 minutes. Your interview can take place online or in person depending on your preferences and where in the UK you're based.

During the interview I will ask about how you use social media in your business, the steps you take to improve your visibility and your thoughts about social media algorithms. There are no right or wrong answers! I'd simply like to hear about your experiences.

If you're interested in taking part please email me:
reruddock1@sheffield.ac.uk

WHO AM I?



Before embarking on a PhD, I worked in social media marketing and ran my own business for 9 years. I worked predominantly with women business owners to help them use social media marketing to grow their businesses, and I even wrote and published a book - The Social Media Marketing Handbook. I'm passionate about improving opportunities for women in business and this PhD project is part of that journey!

You can read more about my background, research and work at the University of Sheffield here: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/socstudies/people/research-students/rebecca-ruddock>

Throughout my PhD research I am working with two experienced academics in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield.

**DR HARRISON
SMITH**



**PROFESSOR HELEN
KENNEDY**



Appendix 3: Interview consent form



Interview Participant - Informed Consent Form

Project title: Exploring the algorithmic sense-making practices of self-employed women in the context of everyday entrepreneurship

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet provided to me. (If you answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	☐	☐
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that taking part in the project will include participating in an interview which will last between 30 - 90 minutes.	☐	☐
I agree that whilst I am participating in this interview video and audio recordings will be made. I agree to being recorded and for transcripts of the anonymised audio recordings to be used in the research.	☐	☐
Subsequent to my interview, I agree to contacting the researcher via a messaging app or email if there is any further information I would like to share.	☐	☐
I agree that if I choose to contact the researcher with additional information after the interview what I share can be anonymised and used in the research.	☐	☐
I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.	☐	☐
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.	☐	☐
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, business name and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.	☐	☐
I agree that my anonymised data can be used by the researcher in their PhD project.	☐	☐
I agree to my anonymised data being stored in the University of Sheffield's data repository - ORDA - for a minimum of 10 years after the project is completed.	☐	☐

I agree that the answers I provide during the interview may be quoted and paraphrased in the final report and future publications. I understand that a pseudonym will be used in place of my name in any instances where my words are quoted.	☐	☐
I agree to a general description of the type of business I run and the number of years I have been in business to be included in the final report and future publications.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	☐	☐
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	☐	☐

Thank you very much for expressing interest in participating in this study. Please complete this form, stating whether or not you agree to take part. Please read each question carefully and provide a yes or no answer using the tick boxes. If you have any questions, please contact me using the details below.

Name of participant [printed]:

Signature:

Date:

Name of researcher [printed]:

Signature:

Date:

Contact details for further information:

Researcher: Rebecca Ruddock, reruddock1@sheffield.ac.uk

Supervisor: Harrison Smith, harrison.smith@sheffield.ac.uk

Appendix 4: Interview participant information form

About You

Thank you for your participation in my PhD project. One aspect of my research involves investigating the differences that might exist between different women entrepreneurs, so I am asking you to provide some details about yourself in the form below. Previous research has found that personal factors, such as age, gender identity, ethnicity, sexual orientation and ability / disability affects how individuals experience both social media and entrepreneurship. Therefore, I am asking you the following questions to help me understand whether different groups of women entrepreneurs have different experiences when using social media and encountering algorithms.

All questions are optional and you may choose not to answer specific questions if they make you feel uncomfortable. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time.

All of your information will be kept confidential, stored securely and in line with data protection legislation. For more details please refer to the detailed information sheet that was provided to you.

1. How old are you:

2. What is your primary source of income:

Please tick one of the following options

- ☐ Self-employment
- ☐ Paid employment
- ☐ Government provided benefits
- ☐ Other (please specify):

3. What is your total annual household income?

Please tick one of the following options

- ☐ £9,999 or less
- ☐ £10,000 to £19,999
- ☐ £20,000 to £29,999
- ☐ £30,000 to £39,000
- ☐ £40,000 to £49,999
- ☐ £50,000 to £59,999
- ☐ £60,000 to £69,999
- ☐ £70,000 to £99,999
- ☐ £100,000 or more

4. Do you have children under the age of 18?

Please tick one of the following options

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

5. If you answered yes to the previous question, please tell me how old your children are.

If you would prefer not to answer, leave the box blank.

6. What is the highest educational or work-related qualification you have?

If you would prefer not to answer, leave the box blank.

7. Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more?

Please tick one of the following options

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

8. Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities?

Please tick one of the following options

- ☐ Yes, a lot
- ☐ Yes, a little
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Not applicable

9. What is your ethnic group?

Please tick the option that you feel best describes your ethnicity.

White

- ☐ English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
- ☐ Irish
- ☐ Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- ☐ Any other White background, please describe:

Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups

- ☐ White and Black Caribbean
- ☐ White and Black African
- ☐ White and Asian
- ☐ Any other Mixed / Multiple ethnic background, please describe:

Asian / Asian British

- ☐ Indian
- ☐ Pakistani
- ☐ Bangladeshi
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ Any other Asian background, please describe:

Black / African / Caribbean / Black British

- ☐ African
- ☐ Caribbean
- ☐ Any Black / African / Caribbean background, please describe:

Other ethnic group

- ☐ Arab
- ☐ Any other ethnic group, please describe:

10. What is your gender?

Please tick one of the following options

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Other, please specify:
- ☐ Prefer not to say

11. Is this the same as the gender you were assigned at birth?

Please tick one of the following options

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

12. Which of the following best describes how you think about yourself?

Please tick one of the following options

- ☐ Lesbian / gay
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Heterosexual / straight
- ☐ Queer
- ☐ Asexual
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other, please specify:

13. Is there anything else you would like to add about yourself?

Appendix 5: Detailed participant profiles

All participants stated their gender is female and the same as the gender assigned at birth.

Job titles were provided by participants and, therefore, they may be unfamiliar and the meaning may not be immediately obvious. Descriptions of participants' businesses are used to contextualise participants' job titles. Descriptions of participants' businesses and background are based on what participants shared in interviews and have been written using their specific language. This also means that the details I have about each participant's business and professional background are not uniform as I invited participants to share with me what was important to them and what they felt comfortable sharing.

Highest educational or work-related qualification was an open question so there is some variation in description and level of detail provided by participants.

Pseudonym: Elizabeth

- Job title: Dance Teacher
- Brief description of business: Elizabeth is a Dance Teacher who runs adult dance based fitness classes for adults. She also teaches dance to children at a local Dance School.
- Professional background: Elizabeth has been dancing since the age of 12 and achieved several accredited Dance Teaching qualifications. She has a BA(hons) Degree in Arts Management, which included modules about marketing.
- Age: 32
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: £50,000 to £59,999
- Children under the age of 18: Yes
(Elizabeth has a young child and, at the time of our interview, had recently returned to full-time self-employment following maternity leave and subsequent period of illness)

- Age of children: 2
 - Highest educational or work-related qualification: BA Degree, International Dance Teachers' Association Licentiate teaching qualification
 - Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Yes
 - Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? No
 - Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: N/A
-

Pseudonym: Natalie

- Job title: Business Development Coach
- Brief description of business: Natalie provides online business development services to people who have online businesses. This includes graphic design, planning, organisation and personal and business development. She works predominantly with women, mostly in creative businesses as well as some women who identify as healers. She lives with her parents and works on her business part-time, alongside paid employment.
- Professional background: Natalie previously worked in retail, followed by admin roles. She then went to college to study Social Care. She worked for a Youth Organisation for 17 years, before leaving to become self-employed.
- Age: 42
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: £30,000 to £39,000
- Children under the age of 18: No
- Age of children: N/A

- Highest educational or work-related qualification: BA degree
 - Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Yes
 - Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Yes, a little
 - Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: Single; Living with parents
-

Pseudonym: Phoebe

- Job title: Astrologer
- Brief description of business: Phoebe is an Astrologer who specialises in the lunar cycles, particularly how knowledge of lunar cycles can help people in personal growth and development. She sells astrology reports, and online courses on subjects such as creative journaling related to astrology, and occasionally sells artwork that is informed by her spiritual practice.
- Professional background: Prior to her current business, Phoebe was a self-employed 'Productivity Coach'. Her current work as an Astrologer developed from her personal interest in astrology.
- Age: 45
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: £40,000 to £49,999
- Children under the age of 18: No
- Age of children: N/A
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: BSC Hons Degree
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Yes - ADHD

- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Yes, a little
 - Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: N/A
-

Pseudonym: Alison

- Job title: Visual Impact Specialist
- Brief description of business: Alison describes herself as a Visual Impact Specialist who designs brands for small businesses, including social media templates and website graphics. She works closely with a number of website developers, and has recently started learning how to build websites herself. Prior to this focus on brand design, her signature product was personalised cartoon figures that were popular with small business owners. She still offers this product but it is no longer the focus of her business.
- Professional background: Alison has a Higher National Certificate in Social Care.
- Age: 36
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: £20,000 to £29,999
- Children under the age of 18: Yes
- Age of children: 10
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: HNC Social Care
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Yes
- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Yes, a little

- Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add:
-

Pseudonym: Suzanne

- Job title: Dog Groomer
- Brief description of business: Suzanne offers mobile dog grooming services. She carries out the dog grooming in her own van, which she has adapted for this purpose. She delivers her services across South Yorkshire, and in some areas surrounding the county.
- Professional background: She started dog groomer upon leaving school at the age of 16. She was employed as a dog groomer for a number of years. She then converted a summer house in her mum's garden to a dog grooming salon. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 she was unable to operate her business from her salon due to restrictions. She purchased and converted a van and started offering mobile dog grooming services.
- Age: Not provided
- Primary source of income: Not provided
- Total annual household income: Not provided
- Children under the age of 18: Not provided
- Age of children: Not provided
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: Not provided
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Not provided
- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Not provided
- Ethnicity: Not provided

- Sexual orientation: Not provided
- Anything else they wanted to add: Not provided

Pseudonym: Sophie

- Job title: Retailer of Crystal-based Products
- Brief description of business: Sophie makes and sells crystal jewellery, crystal bundles, and crystal grids that she creates herself. She also creates and sells products to educate women about how to use crystals effectively, such as a monthly subscription service that includes a pack of crystals and an ebook. She also offers one-to-one video consultations, and is currently in the process of creating ebooks.
- Professional background: Sophie previously had a craft business, which she described as making and selling “random things”, such as knitted gloves. During the COVID-19 she joined several Facebook Groups and came across someone who had set up a craft business and, subsequently, was offering coaching services to help women build their own craft businesses. Sophie worked with this woman to refine the focus of her business. This led her to focus on crystal-based products
- Age: 54
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: £40,000 to £49,999
- Children under the age of 18: No
- Age of children: N/A
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: Masters degree
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Prefer not to say
- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? No

- Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: N/A
-

Pseudonym: Diane

- Job title: Costume Maker
- Brief description of business: Diane makes custom dancewear and costumes for children, and had been in business 6 months at the time of our interview. Her self-employed income is supplemented by Universal Credit. Her self-employment is part-time as she has health conditions that affect her ability to work and she also has caregiving responsibilities for her young son.
- Professional background: Diane achieved a BTEC in Fashion after leaving school. She then went to University and did a Law degree. However, she subsequently decided that she wanted to pursue sewing as it was her passion, and she felt it would give her the flexibility to work around her health conditions. Diane started making dance costumes for her son who participates in dancing. Parents of her son's friends saw the costumes she made and approached her to make costumes for their children. This led her to take a business course, delivered by an online Business Coach. However, she had to postpone her plans to start a business due to a health condition. After recovering from surgery, she started her current business.
- Age: 35
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: £20,000 to £29,999
- Children under the age of 18: Yes
- Age of children: 10
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: BA (Hons) Business Law
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Yes

- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Yes, a little
 - Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: No
-

Pseudonym: Jessica

- Job title: Health and Wellness Coach
- Brief description of business: Jessica is a Health and Wellness coach who works with women to help them build confidence and improve their self-esteem, primarily through a one-to-one coaching service. At the time of our interview she was also developing nutrition-based services.
- Professional background: Jessica described her business as being inspired and informed by her personal experiences of trauma. Prior to her current business, she had a business selling and making jewellery.
- Age: Not provided
- Primary source of income: Not provided
- Total annual household income: Not provided
- Children under the age of 18: Not provided
- Age of children: Not provided
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: Not provided
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Not provided
- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Not provided
- Ethnicity: Not provided

- Gender: Not provided
 - Is this gender the same as the gender assigned at birth? Not provided
 - Sexual orientation: Not provided
 - Anything else they wanted to add: Not provided
-

Pseudonym: Kimberley

- Job title: Founder of a Murder Mystery Game business and Creator of True Crime content
- Brief description of business: Kimberley creates what she describes as detective games with a historical twist. She is also a YouTuber and podcaster, creating and publishing true crime related content. Recently she has begun writing and selling city tours, related to true crime as icebreaker activities for corporate events.
- Professional background: Prior to her current business, Kimberley had an online retail business for a number of years selling lingerie and shapewear. Her retail business had grown to a size where she would need to acquire storage facilities to continue. She did not want to acquire these facilities as she felt it would limit the flexibility that she has working from home. This was important to her as she is a parent to two children. She also reflected that Brexit had created new challenges for her retail business.
- Age: 42
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: £20,000 to £29,999
- Children under the age of 18: Yes
- Age of children: 14 and 12
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: BSc (Hons) degree
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: No

- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? N/A
 - Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: I was diagnosed at 41 with inattentive ADHD so I am classed as neurodivergent
-

Pseudonym: Nadia

- Job title: Private Tutor
- Brief description of business: Nadia is a private tutor for children of primary and secondary school ages. She specialises in English and Maths but covers other topics as well. She tutors children on a one-to-one basis.
- Professional background: Nadia trained as primary school teacher, obtaining a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). She grew her business gradually through word-of-mouth whilst working as a Primary School teacher, and now works full time as a self-employed Private Tutor.
- Age: 35
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: Not provided
- Children under the age of 18: Yes
- Age of children: 1
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: Masters Degree in Education
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Not provided
- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Not provided

- Ethnicity: Asian
 - Gender: Not provided
 - Anything else they wanted to add: N/A
-

Pseudonym: Fran

- Job title: Business and Personal Development Coach
- Brief description of business: Fran offers one-to-one business coaching and personal development coaching and mentoring for professionals. At the time of our interview, Fran was preparing to launch a group business coaching programme that would be delivered online. She specialises in menopause coaching and menopause workshops and seminars. She incorporates holistic practices, such as meditation, into her coaching services.
- Professional background: Fran has a background in sales, marketing, account management, recruitment, training and development. She has also worked as a coach within social welfare, helping people who want to set up their own business. She has been working for 38 years. She has a HNC in Business Finance. She spent some time working for a family business led by her father. She has also previously been self-employed as a Reiki Healer, prior to her current business and she spoke of the challenges of juggling self-employment whilst being a single mother to two children (her children are now over 18).
- Age: 52
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: £40,000 to £49,999
- Children under the age of 18: No
- Age of children: N/A
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: Currently working to complete Bachelor's Degree prior to that Level 4
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Yes

- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Yes, a little
 - Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: I am T2 Diabetic and also postmenopausal woman – this is relevant as both can impact brain fog, performance and mental, physical and emotional health and wellbeing.
-

Pseudonym: Michelle

- Job title: Sports Massage Therapist
- Brief description of business: Michelle is a mobile Sports Massage Therapist; she delivers her services in client's homes, mostly in South Yorkshire. She has been a self-employed Sports Massage Therapist for approximately six years. She specifically focuses on working with people in pain, and her services include pain education. She also works with people in end-of-life home care and people undergoing cancer treatment.
- Professional background: Prior to self-employment, Michelle was a Biomedical Scientist. Having decided to change career, she undertook a course in sports massage therapy. She had been a Sports Massage Therapist for six years at the time of our interview.
- Age: 36
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: £60,000 to £69,999
- Children under the age of 18: No
- Age of children: N/A
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: BSc
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Yes

- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? No
 - Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add:
-

Pseudonym: Claire

- Job title: Business Coach
- Brief description of business: Claire provides business coaching services to women entrepreneurs who are mostly over the age of 35. She delivers one-to-one coaching through three, six, and twelve month programmes of her own design. She also provides ad hoc support, such as one-off meetings with clients that address specific topics such as goal setting and finance. At the time of our interview Claire had been in business for approximately six years. Alongside her core business, she also provides consultancy services to a University and occasionally supports businesses with grant writing.
- Professional background: Prior to starting her business, Claire worked in Higher Education and has a background in grant writing. After having a child, she decided to become self-employed as she hoped this would provide her with greater flexibility. She undertook a course in social media marketing whilst on maternity leave, although she did not provide details of the course provider. She initially provided social media support to small businesses but described getting “sick of it”, so began offering business coaching for women.
- Age: 42
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: Not provided
- Children under the age of 18: Yes
- Age of children: 9
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: Masters Degree

- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: No
 - Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? No
 - Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add:
-

Pseudonym: Laura

- Job title: Career Coach
- Brief description of business: Laura provides career coaching, primarily to young women who are seeking support to help them develop their career or transition to a different career. She also offers corporate training and facilitation focused on career development. Her services are mostly delivered online, via video conferencing tools. She runs her business part-time, working two days self-employed, alongside working three days a week for a charity.
- Professional background: Laura has a background in Psychology, having achieved a Masters Degree in Psychology. She previously worked on a British Military Programme, followed by work for a charity. She undertook a two-day free course about coaching. During the COVID-19 pandemic she had more free time and this prompted her to set up a business in career coaching. In the process of setting up her business, she studied for a coaching certification.
- Age: 30
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: Not provided
- Children under the age of 18: Not provided
- Age of children: Not provided
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: Masters Degree

- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: No
 - Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? N/A
 - Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add:
-

Pseudonym: Bhavana

- Job title: Holistic Therapist
- Brief description of business: Bhavana is a Holistic Therapist who practices Reiki, sound healing, and colour therapy. She rents rooms at several locations from which she provides in-person treatments. She also works with some clients online. She occasionally collaborates with other therapists to deliver workshops. At the time of our interview, Bhavana had been in business for approximately three years.
- Professional background: Bhavana previously worked as a Teaching Assistant in a school setting. She describes herself as having a background in creativity, referring especially to her Bachelors Degree in Textiles. She has completed Level 1 and Level 2 certifications in Reiki.
- Age: 38
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: Not provided
- Children under the age of 18: No
- Age of children: N/A
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: BA(hons) Degree
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Yes

- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Yes, a lot
 - Ethnicity: Indian
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: Regarding my illness, I'm currently recovering from an autoimmune condition. So most of my business is on hold until I fully recover.
-

Pseudonym: Hannah

- Job title: Writer who provides business support for the funeral industry
- Brief description of business: Hannah describes herself as “a writer who supports businesses in the funeral industry” with marketing and messaging. She also delivers talks and lectures, but she does not use social media to promote this aspect of her business.
- Professional background: Hannah has been combining self-employment with paid employment for over 20 years. She has had a number of self-employed roles including; admin / virtual assistant, training, one-to-one teaching with excluded children. She ran a sustainable living blog for six years, which supported families who want to live more sustainability on a budget. Following the death of her son, she stopped blogging as it had become too difficult. She then began working for the burial ground where her son is buried, on a self-employed basis, supporting them primarily with admin and sustainability issues. This work developed into her current business. She has completed a Digital Marketing Institute (DMI) Level Five qualification in Digital Marketing.
- Age: 47
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: £60,000 to £69,999
- Children under the age of 18: Yes
- Age of children: 12, 9 and 7

- Highest educational or work-related qualification: Masters Degree
 - Disability / Long-term Health Condition: No
 - Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? N/A
 - Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: N/A
-

Pseudonym: Catherine

- Job title: Founder who runs self-care and wellbeing events
- Brief description of business: Catherine runs self-care events mainly for women. Her events include vision board sessions that are centered on wellbeing and a bullet journaling club. Her sessions also encourage people to take a break from screens, which she describes as promoting digital wellbeing. She had been in business approximately 5 years at the time of our interview. She works around her children's schedules, working mostly when they are at school or in bed.
- Professional background: Prior to starting her business, Catherine worked for the NHS. She decided to start a business because she wanted to balance work with her family life; at the time she had an infant child. She received support from the Princes Trust when she started her business in 2018, which she said equipped her with business skills.
- Age: 35
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: £40,000 to £49,999
- Children under the age of 18: Yes
- Age of children: Not provided

- Highest educational or work-related qualification: Masters Degree
 - Disability / Long-term Health Condition: No
 - Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? N/A
 - Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: Started my business with help from the Princes Trust in 2018
-

Pseudonym: Vanessa

- Job title: Fashion Retailer, Creative Founder and Interior Designer
- Brief description of business: Vanessa sells hair accessories, mostly head wraps which she makes using fabrics from Africa. She also uses African fabrics to make home accessories, such as lampshades and cushion covers. Her products are mostly sold in the UK, but she has some customers in America and has shipped to Asia, the Caribbean and South America. Additionally, she holds workshops, mostly in London, where she teaches people how to style their head wraps. Vanessa works in full-time paid employment, and runs her business alongside this.
- Professional background: Vanessa is a full-time interior designer. Her sister gifted her some money for her birthday to buy some fabrics and encouraged her to start a business.
- Age: 29
- Primary source of income: Paid employment
- Total annual household income: £30,000 to £39,000
- Children under the age of 18: No
- Age of children: N/A

- Highest educational or work-related qualification: University
 - Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Yes
 - Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Yes, a little
 - Ethnicity: African
 - Sexual orientation: Bisexual
 - Anything else they wanted to add: N/A
-

Pseudonym: Farrah

- Job title: Perfume Retailer and Bookkeeper
- Brief description of business: Although Farrah's main source of income is from self-employed work as a Bookkeeper, she does not use social media to market the bookkeeping service. She chose to focus our discussion in the interview on her perfume business. She primarily sells fragrances, but also skincare and makeup, through a network marketing role.
- Professional background: Farrah is a bookkeeper and she began selling the fragrance products to generate additional income. She did not share any additional information about her background.
- Age: 51
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: £20,000 to £29,999
- Children under the age of 18: Yes
- Age of children: 17 and 18
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: HND in Computing
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: No

- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? N/A
 - Ethnicity: Indian
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: My job is as a bookkeeper but I have my business too selling fragrance products which I have been doing for 3 years.
-

Pseudonym: Hulwi

- Job title: Coach
- Brief description of business: Hulwi provides one-to-one coaching for Muslim women who are stressed. During coaching sessions, she works with clients on issues such as values, anxiety, and stress. She is part-time self-employed, and self-employment is her sole source of income.
- Professional background: Hulwi has undertaken courses in coaching and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). Prior to self-employment she was a school teacher. Upon leaving teaching, she into postgraduate study and achieve a Masters Degree.
- Age: 44
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: £9,999 or less
- Children under the age of 18: No
- Age of children: N/A
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: Masters Degree
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: No
- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? N/A

- Ethnicity: African
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: N/A
-

Pseudonym: Rachel

- Job title: Property Portfolio Builder
- Brief description of business: Rachel describes her business as a Property Portfolio Building Company. She explained that in the property industry her work can be referred to as property sources or property deal packages. The main purpose of her business is to help people who have money to invest but have not got the time to invest it. Her service includes finding properties for clients, and renovating and renting those properties.
- Professional background: Rachel received an inheritance and decided to invest it into property. She gained guidance from a friend to help her build her property portfolio. She has a background in marketing, which she feels has been valuable in her business as it has helped her to attract clients. She has undertaken a short course about property.
- Age: 34
- Primary source of income: Other
- Total annual household income: £70,000 to £99,999
- Children under the age of 18: Yes
- Age of children: 7 and 9
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: Degree
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: No
- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? N/A
- Ethnicity: White and Black Caribbean

- Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
- Anything else they wanted to add:

Pseudonym: Summer

- Job title: Reiki Master Practitioner
- Brief description of business: Summer is an Energy Healer, Reiki Master practitioner, and Animal Reiki practitioner. She practices healing on animals and humans (mainly women)
- Professional background: Summer trained as a Reiki practitioner approximately seven years before the time of our interview. She also has a Higher National Certificate (HNC) in Business and Finance. She was previously self-employed full-time, but had to secure a part-time job to supplement her income when her husband lost his job. At the time of our interview she was applying for full-time positions, and planned to be self-employed alongside this paid employment.
- Age: 55
- Primary source of income: Paid employment
- Total annual household income: Not provided
- Children under the age of 18: Prefer not to say
- Age of children: Not provided
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: HNC in Business and Finance, and Reiki Master Practitioner
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: No
- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? N/A
- Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British

- Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: N/A
-

Pseudonym: Alice

- Job title: Founder / Happiness Consultant
- Brief description of business: Alice works with employers to promote happiness and wellbeing in workplaces. She delivers her services through talks, workshops, away days, lunch and learn sessions. She works with employers in a wide variety of sectors.
- Professional background: Prior to being self-employed, Alice was a solicitor for an insurance company. She was part of the senior leadership team and ran a department. She had a daughter five years prior to our interview, and subsequently developed rheumatoid arthritis which caused her a great deal of pain. She described how having a child and suffering from a long-term health condition caused her to reflect on her happiness. This led her to research mindset and psychology, and she developed an interest in positive psychology. She returned to work part-time and described the “part-time juggle” of being a mum and a corporate lawyer, which led her to being burnt out. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted further reflection and she started working with a career coach to help her decide on her next steps. She began to develop ideas for a business, which she subsequently launched approximately a year before the time of our interview.
- Age: 40
- Primary source of income: Self-employment
- Total annual household income: £100,000 or more
- Children under the age of 18: Yes
- Age of children: 5
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: Post-graduate qualification (Bar Vocational Course)
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Yes

- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Yes, a little
 - Ethnicity: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add:
-

Pseudonym: Lily

- Job title: Founder & Outsourcing Specialist
- Brief description of business: Lily works predominantly with female online entrepreneurs and described her business as supporting them to “put their business in a good place before they start to outsource”. Her services are designed to help entrepreneurs outsource and delegate effectively. She also provides admin and tech support to entrepreneurs.
- Professional background: Lily has been in business for a number of years and previously provided virtual assistant services for small businesses.
- Age: Not provided
- Primary source of income: Not provided
- Total annual household income: Not provided
- Children under the age of 18: Not provided
- Age of children: Not provided
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: Not provided
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Not provided
- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Not provided
- Ethnicity: Not provided

- Sexual orientation: Not provided
 - Anything else they wanted to add: N/A
-

Pseudonym: Julia

- Job title: Personal Trainer & Health Coach
 - Brief description of business: Julia's provides health coaching and personal training services. Her services are delivered one-to-one and to groups.
 - Professional background: Julia was previously a Senior Manager for a Drug and Alcohol Service. She was diagnosed with a hormone imbalance, which prompted her to research hormone imbalance. She then trained as a personal trainer and decided to focus on hormones. She subsequently extended her specialist area of knowledge to include menopause and fitness, and began focusing on working with clients who are experiencing menopause.
 - Age: 53
 - Primary source of income: Self-employment
 - Total annual household income: £30,000 to £39,000
 - Children under the age of 18: No
 - Age of children: N/A
 - Highest educational or work-related qualification: Diploma
 - Disability / Long-term Health Condition: No
 - Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? N/A
 - Ethnicity: Caribbean
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: N/A
-

Pseudonym: Nia

- Job title: Skincare Practitioner
 - Brief description of business: Nia is a skincare and facials specialist. She provides facial treatments to women in and around her local area, including brides-to-be and skincare parties. At the time of our interview she had been running the business for approximately six months, and worked in full-time employment alongside being self-employed.
 - Professional background: Nia did not provide any information about her professional background.
 - Age: 28
 - Primary source of income: Paid employment
 - Total annual household income: £20,000 to £29,999
 - Children under the age of 18: No
 - Age of children: N/A
 - Highest educational or work-related qualification: College - 3 A*
 - Disability / Long-term Health Condition: No
 - Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? N/A
 - Ethnicity: White and Black African
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual / straight
 - Anything else they wanted to add: N/A
-

Pseudonym: Melissa

- Job title: Founder of embroidery business
 - Brief description of business: Melissa primarily customises workwear, such as uniforms, using embroidery. She also customises clothing for other purposes, particularly custom embroidered sweatshirts for people in the motorbike community.
 - Professional background: She previously had a business providing remote admin services to entrepreneurs. She also had a craft business, before launching her current business.
 - Age: Not provided
 - Primary source of income: Not provided
 - Total annual household income: Not provided
 - Children under the age of 18: Not provided
 - Age of children: Not provided
 - Highest educational or work-related qualification: Not provided
 - Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Not provided
 - Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Not provided
 - Ethnicity: Not provided
 - Sexual orientation: Not provided
 - Anything else they wanted to add: N/A
-

Pseudonym: Erica

- Job title: Business Consultant
- Brief description of business: Erica has a business consultancy business that has been established for a number of years, and she works predominantly with women entrepreneurs. Her services are delivered one-to-one, mostly online, and she also speaks at events. At the time of our interview she was also developing a new business which will offer nutritional education and support to women, predominantly over 35, and nutrition support for children and adults with mental health challenges.
- Professional background: Erica was previously a Family Lawyer.
- Age: Not provided
- Primary source of income: Not provided
- Total annual household income: Not provided
- Children under the age of 18: Not provided
- Age of children: Not provided
- Highest educational or work-related qualification: Not provided
- Disability / Long-term Health Condition: Not provided
- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Not provided
- Ethnicity: Not provided
- Sexual orientation: Not provided
- Anything else they wanted to add: Not provided

Appendix 6: Interview schedule

Interview Schedule

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

I'm a PhD student at the University of Sheffield, carrying out research to investigate how self-employed women understand social media algorithms and how this affects the ways they use social media.

I'm also exploring the differences that might exist between different women entrepreneurs in relation to social media and algorithms.

I'm also a self-employed business woman myself and for the past 9+ years my work has concentrated on supporting other women entrepreneurs with their social media marketing.

Consent:

You have been provided with an information sheet with further information about the project and a consent form, which you have kindly signed and sent back to me. Before we begin I'd just like to check that you're still happy to participate?

And do you agree to the interview being recorded?

OK great, I'm going to start recording now.

Question	Prompts
Background information	
Please tell me about your business	<i>What kind of work do you do? / What kind of products or services do you offer?</i> <i>Can you tell me about how you got into business?</i> <i>What job title would you give yourself / how would you describe what you do?</i>
Can you tell me about how you use social media in your business?	<i>Which platforms do you use?</i> <u><i>For each platform ask:</i></u>

	<i>What do you use platform X for? e.g. marketing? peer support? Collaboration?</i> <i>Why have you chosen to use this platform?</i>
Social Media Use	
How do you decide what to post?	<i>Is that the same on every platform?</i> <i>If not, how and why does your content differ across platforms?</i>
Can you tell me about the steps you take to get people to see your social media posts?	<i>Is that the same on every platform?</i> <i>If not, how and why does your approach differ?</i>
Is there anything else you think you could be doing to be more visible on social media?	<i>Can you tell me more about that?</i> <i>What are the reasons for not doing those things?</i>
What, if any, are some of the challenges you face when using social media?	<i>Is that the same on X platform, or are there any differences in the challenges you experience on X platform?</i> <i>(Ask for each platform)</i>
What does success look like to you?	
How important is the success of your social media marketing?	
How do you measure the success of your social media marketing?	<i>What metrics do you look at? e.g. likes, comments, shares.</i> <i>What do these metrics tell you?</i>

	<i>In what ways does that affect what you do on social media?</i> <i>Is that the same on X platform, or are there any differences?</i> <i>(Ask for each platform)</i>
Algorithms	
What is your understanding of the phrase 'social media algorithm'?	<i>Reassure participants that I am not looking to judge answers as right or wrong.</i>
Provide simple explanation of algorithms: Algorithms are used by social media platforms for a variety of purposes, including recommending content and people to follow and deciding who to show your posts to. However, social media platforms tell us very little about how their algorithms work. We do know that algorithms take into account lots of different factors to decide which posts to show to which users but we don't know exactly what these factors are or how exactly algorithms work on different social media platforms.	
In what ways do you think the algorithms on X platform affect the visibility of your posts?	<i>Do you think it is the same for everyone?</i> <i>Do algorithms affect everyone equally?</i>
In what ways do you think social media algorithms affect your business?	
If / when you have questions about social media algorithms or visibility on social media, where do you look for answers?	<i>Do you ever talk to other business owners about what's working / what's not / what can I do to be more visible?</i>

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Do you have any questions for me?

Ask if I can contact them if I have any follow up questions?

Would you like to choose a pseudonym?

Do they know anyone else who would be interested in participating?

Appendix 7: Participant observation information sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Facebook Group Admin

Project Title: *Self-employed womens' understandings of social media algorithms*

You are invited to participate in a research project which explores how self-employed women understand social media algorithms, how this affects the ways in which they use social media and the differences that might exist between different women.

This is a PhD project being conducted by Rebecca Ruddock, a PhD student in the Department of Sociological Studies at The University of Sheffield.

Before you decide whether or not you are willing to participate, it is important that you understand why the research is being carried out and what will be involved. Please read the following information carefully before making your decision. If you have any questions please contact me.

What is the project's purpose?

Algorithms are used by social media platforms for a variety of purposes, including recommending content and people to follow and deciding who to show your posts to. Many self-employed women use social media to market their businesses but not much is known about how they attempt to understand algorithms nor how their understanding of algorithms influences their social media practices. This project aims to find out more about this and explore whether any differences exist between different women.

Why am I being asked to participate?

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are the administrator or organiser of a group for self-employed women. I am aware that self-employed women may discuss social media marketing, online visibility, and algorithms in groups like the one you facilitate, so I am asking for your permission to join the group and observe what takes place there from now until December 2023.

Do I have to take part?

It is your choice as to whether you take part or not. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form.

You are free to withdraw from the project at any time without any negative consequences. You do not have to give a reason. If you wish to withdraw from the research, please contact reruddock1@sheffield.ac.uk

Please note that by choosing to participate in this research, this will not create a legally binding agreement, nor is it intended to create an employment relationship between you and the University of Sheffield.

What will happen to me if I take part? What do I have to do?

If you choose to participate in this study I will observe the conversations that take place in your group about social media marketing, online visibility and algorithms. I will write detailed field notes about my observations but I will not take any screenshots of content posted in the group. Pseudonyms will be used in my field notes and the real names of members will be kept in a file that is stored securely and only accessible to myself.

Members of your group can opt out of being observed by emailing me or using a Google form, the link to which I will share in the group. They are also free to withdraw from the study at any time. As my notes will be anonymised, if a participant withdraws after the study has begun it will not be possible to retrospectively remove

information about their activity from my notes. However, subsequent activity will not be observed or included in field notes.

I am also asking for your consent to approach individual group members directly to ask them to participate in an interview with me. They will be provided with detailed information about the project and what the interview entails and asked to sign a consent form before participating.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

Yes. Neither yourself, the group, or individual group members will be personally identified in any reports or publications.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

It is hoped that this work will benefit women in business by helping academics, policymakers and organisations that support business women to better understand the unique challenges that self-employed women face when using social media to market their businesses.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

Although this project is considered low risk, it does deal with issues to do with gender inequality within the context of work. This could mean that sensitive topics arise, such as discrimination or harassment. If you or any of your group members feel that you need support with such issues, I can provide contact details for third party organisations who can help.

What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

According to data protection legislation, I am required to inform you that the legal basis I am applying in order to process your data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

Field notes will be stored on a secure, encrypted Google Drive provided by the University of Sheffield. I will keep one matrix of participant pseudonyms which will be stored in my University Google Drive separate from all other research data. I will be the only person with access to this matrix. This matrix will be destroyed upon completion of the project.

The results of this project will be included in my PhD thesis and potentially in future academic journal articles and conference presentations. With your consent anonymised data will be archived in the University of Sheffield data repository (ORDA).

Who is the Data Controller?

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the Department of Sociological Studies.

What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research or report a concern or incident?

If you are dissatisfied with any aspect of the research and wish to make a complaint, please contact my supervisor Harrison Smith - harrison.smith@sheffield.ac.uk in the first instance. If you feel your complaint has not been handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of the Department of Sociological Studies: Professor Nathan Hughes – nathan.hughes@sheffield.ac.uk

If the complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

Contact for further information

Please feel free to contact me, Rebecca Ruddock, if you have any other questions or would like to find out more about the project. My email address is reruddock1@sheffield.ac.uk

You can also contact my project Supervisor Dr Harrison Smith. His email address is: harrison.smith@sheffield.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this information.

Appendix 8: Participant observation Google Site (Screenshot)

Participant Information Site

How Do Women Entrepreneurs Understand Social Media Algorithms?



Hi! My name is Beckie Ruddock, I'm a PhD student at the University of Sheffield and I am currently carrying out research to investigate how self-employed women understand social media algorithms and how this affects the ways they use social media. I'm also exploring the differences that might exist between different women entrepreneurs in relation to social media and algorithms.

I'm also a self-employed business woman myself and for the past 9+ years my work has concentrated on supporting other women entrepreneurs with their social media marketing.

As part of my research, I am going to be observing some of the activity in the [redacted] Facebook group between February 2023 and December 2023, with permission from [redacted].

During this time I will be observing conversations in the group about social media, marketing, online visibility and algorithms. I will be making detailed notes about what I observe and use these observations in my research project. My notes will only include posts or comments that relate to the specific topics I just mentioned. I won't take any screenshots. The name of the group and individual group members will not be disclosed in anything I write about my research. You can find out more about the steps I will take to ensure group and individual confidentiality below.

If you would prefer the posts and comments you make in the group not to be included in my research, you can opt out of the study by submitting the simple form below or emailing me at reruddock1@sheffield.ac.uk.

You can withdraw from the study at any time during the observation period, without explaining why. You can do this by using the opt out form below or sending me an email. Alternatively, you are welcome to message [redacted] to opt out or withdraw from the study at any time.

Please note, if you decide to withdraw from the study after the research has begun it will not be possible for your prior posts or comments to be redacted from my field notes. This is because all of my notes will be anonymised to protect the identity and confidentiality of everyone involved, so I won't know who said what. However, if you do withdraw then no further notes will be made about your subsequent posts or comments.

Below you can find detailed information about the project. You are also welcome to [email me](mailto:reruddock1@sheffield.ac.uk) if you have any questions, would like any further information or if you would be interested in participating in a 1-to-1 interview.

Participant Information Site

Opt Out / Withdrawal Form

Please submit this form if you do not want your posts in the Supernova Growth Capsule group to be included in the research study outlined on this page.

reruddock1@sheffield.ac.uk

Switch accounts

Not shared

* Indicates required question

Your name *

Your answer

Do you wish to opt out of this study? *

Yes

Would you like to add any comments?

Who's the purpose of the project?

Algorithms are used by social media platforms for a variety of purposes, including recommending content and people to follow and deciding who to show your posts to. However, social media platforms tell us very little about how their algorithms work. Many self-employed women use social media to market their businesses but not much is known about how they attempt to understand algorithms nor how their understanding of algorithms influences their social media practices. This project aims to find out more about this and to explore whether any differences exist between different women.

It's hoped that this work will benefit women in business by helping academics, policymakers and organisations that support business women to better understand the unique challenges that self-employed women face when using social media to market their businesses.

Please note that by choosing to participate in this research, this will not create a legally binding agreement, nor is it intended to create an employment relationship between you and the University of Sheffield.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

The results of this project will be included in my PhD thesis and potentially in future academic journal articles and conference presentations. The administrator of the Facebook group has also consented to anonymised data being archived in the University of Sheffield data repository (ORDA).

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the Department of Sociological Studies

What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

If the complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

According to data protection legislation, I am required to inform you that the legal basis I am applying in order to process your data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

The results of this project will be included in my PhD thesis and potentially in future academic journal articles and conference presentations. With your consent anonymised data

What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research or report a concern or incident?

If the complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

According to data protection legislation, I am required to inform you that the legal basis I am applying in order to process your data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

The results of this project will be included in my PhD thesis and potentially in future academic journal articles and conference presentations. With your consent anonymised data will be archived in the University of Sheffield data repository (ORDA).

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly

Please feel free to contact me, Rebecca Ruddock, if you have any other questions or would like to find out more about the project. My email address is reruddock1@sheffield.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this information!

Appendix 9: Participant observation consent form for group administrators



Participant Observation (ONLINE) - Informed Consent Form

Project title: Exploring the algorithmic sense-making practices of self-employed women in the context of everyday entrepreneurship

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet provided to me. (If you answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	☐	☐
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that taking part in the project will include the researcher joining my Facebook group [NAME TO BE INSERTED HERE] and observing activity in the group until December 2023.	☐	☐
I agree that the researcher will make detailed notes about the conversations they observe in the group that relate to social media, marketing and algorithms, which will be anonymised.	☐	☐
I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.	☐	☐
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.	☐	☐
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, business name, group name and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.	☐	☐
I agree that the anonymised data collected by the researcher can be used in their PhD project.	☐	☐
I agree to this anonymised data being stored in the University of Sheffield's data repository - ORDA - for a minimum of 10 years after the project is completed.	☐	☐
I agree that comments made in the group may be paraphrased in the final report and future publications. I understand that a pseudonym will be used in place of real names.	☐	☐
I agree to a general description of the group to be included in the final report and future publications.	☐	☐

I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	☐	☐
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	☐	☐

Thank you very much for expressing interest in participating in this study. Please complete this form, stating whether or not you agree to take part. Please read each question carefully and provide a yes or no answer using the tick boxes. If you have any questions, please contact me using the details below.

Name of participant [printed]:

Signature:

Date:

Name of researcher [printed]:

Signature:

Date:

Contact details for further information:

Researcher: Rebecca Ruddock, reruddock1@sheffield.ac.uk

Supervisor: Harrison Smith, harrison.smith@sheffield.ac.uk